



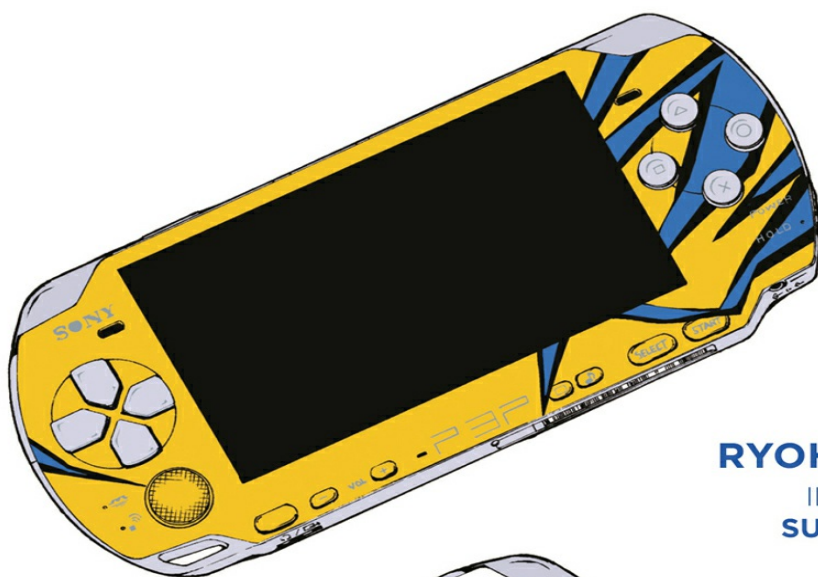
RYOHGO NARITA

9

DURARARA!!

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RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA



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Shinichi Tsukumoya's Commentary

Someone once posed the question to me: Is Izaya Orihara lonely or not?

In my personal opinion, he is alone but fulfilled.

Love, for him, is ever and always a one-way street. Surely he's been loved before in his life, but he would have shut it out entirely. He only feels connection by loving others and not the other way around. That is how he finds fulfillment.

In order to use others, he will allow them to get within a close proximity, but there always remains a daunting wall between his heart and theirs.

If that sounds pretentious to you, rest assured that they were his own words, proudly typed in my chat room a while ago. Send any complaints his way...not that he would feel an ounce of shame about it.

I'd bet it's this absolute fortitude and thick skin that allows him to maintain his position in the world. That's how he says garbage like, "I love every human being on Earth, so all the people of the world ought to love me in return" whether that's his true opinion or just nonsense, it's totally in character for him.

As for the question of if Izaya Orihara loves himself, I have no answer for you.

It's something only he could tell you—and no matter the answer, it's not something anyone else could effect in any case. Likely, even the idea of making an effort to change himself is unacceptable to him in his heart.

That line just now was something I came up with.

Sorry. Even I'm embarrassed about that one.



Mairu: Hey! Hey, Kuru! What do you think?
How's the swimsuit I gave you?
Oh my God, it looks great on you! I love it!

Kururi: Little... Shamed...
[This is a bit... embarrassing.]



VOLUME 9

Ryohgo Narita
ILLUSTRATION BY **Suzuhito Yasuda**



NEW YORK

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RYOHGO NARITA
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Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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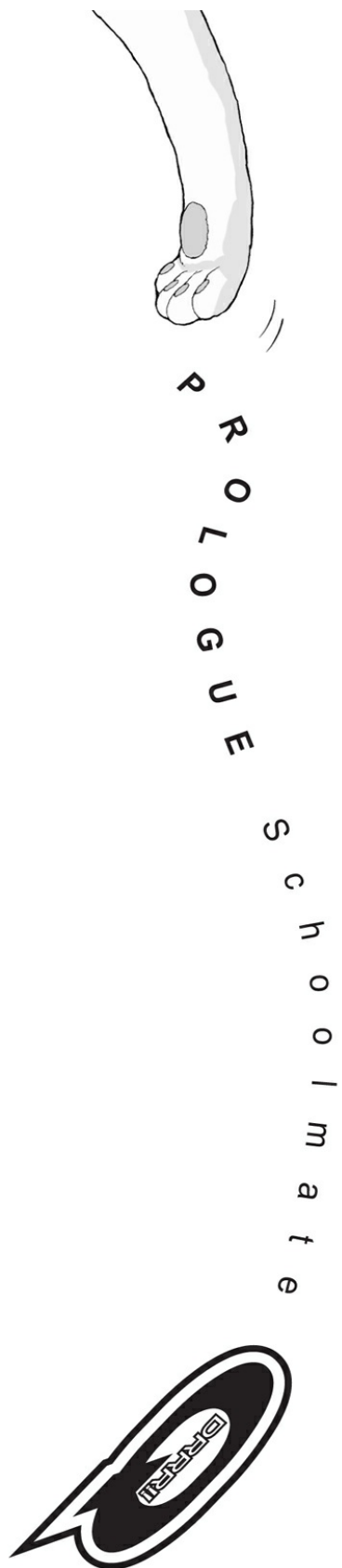
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PROLOGUE: Schoolmate

I'm sorry for taking up your time, Mr. Nakura.

“Erm, Kujiragi, was it? What does an insurance broker want with me?”

I'll just be direct. Are you familiar with someone named Izaya Orihara?

“Izaya Orihara? Sure. He went to the same school as me, and I wouldn't forget a name that odd. Why, did he finally get himself into major trouble? Insurance fraud, maybe? He didn't use my name *again*, did he? Let me just say that whatever it is, I'm not involved. Haven't seen him in ages, either.”

What do you mean, “finally”?

“Oh, you haven't met him in person? You would understand what I mean if you had. It's clear from a glance that he's abnormal. Then again...maybe he would act like a regular guy around a woman like you. He always did have a fair number of female followers who seemed to worship him.”

You mentioned that he might have used your name “again.”

“Yeah...see, I sold him my name.”

Sold him your...name?

“So, I was talking with him in person, and he said there was stuff he wanted to buy without his family finding out, so he wanted to use my name on the online shopping form. I declined at first, of course, but then he offered me a pretty hefty amount of money. I figured it couldn't do any harm; it's not like I was giving him my credit card or bank account numbers.”

What did he actually do with it?

“A couple of things got delivered to me. Orihara would give me advance warning they were coming, and I lived alone, so there wouldn't be any misunderstandings. But I was curious about the contents. There was one time I opened a box and told him it was by mistake.”

What was inside?

“Just normal books. Maybe a bit erotic, but in, like, an ethnic studies kind of way. And he wasn't that angry about my excuse that it was a mistake.”

Was he just an ordinary student at school?

“Ordinary? Well, I hardly ever saw him attend any classes at Raira

College. Not that he was unique in that regard, as plenty of people skipped class all the time. Every now and then, I did see him on campus talking to some weird guy wearing a lab coat. I thought it was a medical student at first, but apparently, he was from outside the school... Actually, scratch that. He's the guy Orihara was joking about, saying that he was a black market doctor so if I ever got shot, I could see him without having to get the cops involved."

...

"Oops, sorry, you were asking about Orihara. But like I said, he wasn't your typical dude, and I kept my distance from him. As I mentioned, aside from the groupies, the only normal friend he had might've been that one guy in the lab coat. In fact, he must've been a friend, if he was bringing the guy onto campus."

Do you suppose he was isolated?

"I heard stories about how in high school he fought all the time with some super-crazy badass guy named Heiwajima. He's not actually that bad when you get to know him, though. But I'll repeat, he was not normal."

And you decided to give this person you weren't even close to the use of your name and address?

"Yeah, it sounds bad when you put it that way...but it wasn't just me."

Not just you?

"He was actually borrowing the names of a number of different people during college. Most of them were women but a few guys, too. And I was kind of hard up for cash, so..."

Is there anything else you know about him? His background, for example.

"Look, I told you, I'm not the guy to ask about that sort of stuff! Seriously, if my work finds out that I lent out my name for these weird shenanigans, I'm going to get so much side-eye, you have no idea!"

Pardon me for asking. I merely heard a rumor that you were close in college.

"And who told you that, huh? Man, what a pain in my ass. I don't even know..."

Is something the matter?

"Actually, now that I think about it...I don't know a single thing about Orihara."

Is there someone else who might know more about him?

"Well, now that I think about it, I wonder if anyone at that college

actually knew about his past or his background. I doubt the groupies were anything more than shallow infatuations... If anyone actually knows personal details about him, it'd have to be the guy in the coat I mentioned."

And what is his name?

"I dunno. I'm kinda getting shivers over here, realizing that I might've made a terrible mistake back then. Ooh! I just felt it for sure. Shiver down my back. Maybe lending him my name was actually a really stupid thing to do..."

It's all right. No one used your name to do anything. As far I know, at least.

"Well, that's good... But are you really trying to look into his background? Does that mean he actually did do something—?"

I'm afraid I can't discuss internal matters with you, other than to say that his name popped up as the recipient of one of our insurance claims.

"...Ah, I see. So you suspect some insurance fraud going on... Well, that does sound like something Orihara might do. He's very good at taking advantage of people... Oh, right, that reminds me. I remember him saying that his hobby was human observation at some point."

Human observation?

"Pretentious, right? Who says, 'My hobby is human observation,' as a college student? That guy does. But it's not necessarily a condescending thing. It's like...you know how when cat people see cats and just find them irresistibly cute? Whether the cat is angry, or sulking, or just sleeping, or whatever."

But wouldn't you call that sort of cat-watching behavior condescending in the first place?

"Not like that, really... Let me take the human-cat comparison a bit further..."

...?

"I bet that if he saw a cat get run over by a car, or the instant it died of illness, or if a cat tore out another cat's throat, he'd still have the same reaction to it."

"...Like, 'Aww, that's so cute.'"

In a Dark Place 1

“How do you feel, Mr. Info Dealer?”

The place looked like a bar. But the open shelving for liquor display was empty, and the wallpaper was peeling here and there. It wasn't in any state for business.

“Or do you prefer that I call you by your full name, Izaya Orihara?”

The voice in the darkened room belonged to a young woman.

She looked to be in her midtwenties. She was dressed like an employee at a high-end boutique, her makeup light and her pixie cut just a tiny bit permed.

Despite her mature looks, her tone of voice was on the young side. There was no response.

Sitting in a number of rusted bar chairs around her were darkened figures.

The significant majority of them were female, but some of the shapes were burly and male. If the lights had been on and the place were clean, the scene might look like hostesses, waiters, and their bodyguards.

But it was the person sitting in the center of the establishment that totally ruled that possibility out.

The man sat in a tasteful steel-frame chair. His outfit looked black in the gloom, but it was impossible to make out the design without more light. Still, whether the lights were on or off made no difference to him.

His head was totally covered by a heavy burlap sack, the kind used to ship coffee beans, hiding his face and hair from view. The sound of his breathing was audible, but he didn't respond to the woman's question. His hands were tied behind his back, and without being able to see, he wasn't in any state to get to his feet.

“Ah, you can't talk back. I guess that makes sense—you took a lot of heavy blows on the way here. Oh, did you break all his teeth?” the pixie-cut woman asked, turning around in her identical chair to the figures behind her.

“We didn't break him down,” one of the nearby women offered curtly. “It'd be a waste since he's so good-looking.”

“Ah, fine then. That leaves us with more fun ahead anyway,” the ringleader replied. Her voice was as youthful as a teenager's, leaving her real

age hard to discern in the darkness.

Turning back around, the domineering, short-haired woman gave no explanation to the man in the hood as to the nature of her group.

“So, Mr. Info Dealer, do you understand why it is that you’re here now?” she asked him once more, and again there was no answer. The only sound was heavy breathing through the fabric. He might not have even been conscious.

“I’ll give you a hint. My nickname...is Earthworm. Does that ring a bell?”

At the mention of that nickname—more of an insult, really—the sack over his head slowly rose.

“Ha-ha! He reacted! Oh man, this is great! He’s like a puppet or something!” the woman named Earthworm cackled, like one of the weirdos in high school teasing a younger student, and prodded the burlap sack where his forehead would be. “I’m going to give you a piece of advice, Izaya Orihara.”

“...”

He remained silent, so she continued, “You might be a big-shot info broker or whatever, but I think you’ve been standing out a bit too much, don’t you?”

“...”

“We learned that there was some freak out there sniffing around after *us*, so we looked into it, and what did we find? You. You’re a real funny guy, aren’t you? About as funny as playing old maid with a deck of fifty-two old maids, from what I hear,” Earthworm went on, an analogy that did not make much sense.

The man in the burlap sack breathed, nothing more.

“Now, an info broker’s one of those guys who goes around talking to red-light ladies, cops, the errand runners for the really scary men, and the barkers trying to drum up business for their brothels...and then sells the things those folks know to others for a little side money, right?”

“...”

“Yet, that’s your main business, you proudly call yourself by the title, and you’re famous for it. Wouldn’t that make you the worst kind of info dealer?” She giggled. “I mean, the guys who sell secrets to the police and the scary men have to hide their identities, or they’re really in trouble, right? Otherwise, they get arrested or lose a joint off their finger. Or get fed to the

fishes in Tokyo Bay, am I right? Huh?”

It was as if she were telling a lurid fairy tale to a child. “Now, I’m going to give you a piece of advice: People who want to stand out like you do are the people least suited to this line of work. Have you learned that lesson now?”

“...”

“Are you listening to me? Okay, forget the hint. I’ll just tell you the answer. Those scary men at the Awakusu-kai paid you to snoop around after us, didn’t they?”

Earthworm rolled her wrist around, drawing a circle on the forehead of the silent man through the burlap. His head rolled with it, loose and unresisting, as though he were totally drained.

“Then again, I’m not sure if my ‘advice’ is going to help you very much.”

“...”

“You won’t ever be able to do this job again, will you?”

Her youthful exuberance at the chance to be cruel clashed with her age.

Who were these women?

And what in the world was happening in this abandoned bar?

That story began a few days earlier, when the info broker Izaya Orihara received a work order from the Awakusu-kai.



CHAPTER 1
Information Broker

Chapter 1: Information Broker

Early August, Tokyo

“Feels like it’s been ages since I rode in this car.”

In the backseat of a luxury sedan, Izaya Orihara sat next to the left window, watching the city pass by. The young man wore a thin black summer coat over his similarly black shirt. He turned to the other passenger and said easily, “Your face is fond and memorable, too, Mr. Shiki.”

“You think so? Feels like we met just the other day,” said an imposing man in his thirties or forties, with striking narrow eyes and an inscrutable expression. “I heard you took a blade to the guts—you all right?”

“Yeah...it made the news, didn’t it? At least there were no photos of me.”

“Who got you?”

“I’m looking into that myself. There are plenty of people with misplaced anger at me, I’m sure...but I doubt you came all this way to ask me that, no?”

“It’s half personal interest, half work obligation. I mean, if someone’s knifing an info source that we utilize, it could signal a hostile intent toward us, that’s all,” Shiki said, stretching his neck to the side. “By the way, Mr. Orihara, are you familiar with someone named Nakura?”

Shiki was deferential, despite the obvious age gap. There was a chilly sharpness to his voice, however, and the interior of the car felt tense on account of it.

Izaya was not affected, as far as his tone was concerned. “Nakura? Is that a last name or a first name? I feel as though there might have been someone named something like that in my middle school or college, or...”

“Well, someone by that name put a bunch of funny ideas into the head of our boss’s little girl...”

“She’s still in elementary school, right? Just because Ikebukuro is safe these days doesn’t mean you can allow her to mingle with bad guys. Or is this a woman you’re talking about?” Izaya asked, not alarmed in the least.

After a few seconds of silence, Shiki moved on to the heart of the matter.

“...Well, that’s enough chitchat. There’s something I want you to look up for us today. We can’t afford to be overt about this, and it’s a bit touchy to be hiring an ordinary detective for the matter.”

“I can ascertain the sort of job it was just from the fact that you came to me. The Awakusu-kai don’t suffer in the least for cutting me loose to take the fall,” Izaya retorted.

The man didn’t bat an eye. “Does the name Amphisbaena mean anything to you?”

Without missing a beat, Izaya replied, “Amphisbaena... A legendary lizard said to live in Libya. A poisonous beast with two heads on the front and back end of its body. Various poets and storytellers have devised various evolutions for the mythical being, such as bat wings. It’s even been used as the centerpiece of Western noble sigils.”

“...I didn’t know any of these things. The only thing I knew was that it was a dragon that showed up in Western mythology.”

“I’d say that puts you in rare company all on its own. Its recognition in Japan is minuscule. If you had to look that up, then I assume whatever you want with me has to do with the word.”

Shiki nodded. “There’s a group named Amphisbaena...or a business, if you want to call it that. They’re running an underground casino.”

“Oh, really? That’s not the name of any gambling establishment the Awakusu-kai runs,” Izaya noted, which suggested he was aware of them all.

Shiki neither confirmed nor denied this suggestion. He didn’t even make a face at the taunt. “I’m sure you’re aware our organization is finding it difficult to open such a business directly. If we try to do it the public way, and there’s even a hint of our name attached to it, there’s no way we’ll get a license. Now, a private apartment setup is a different story...but that’s not the point.”

Shiki paused for a breath, then met Izaya’s eyes through the rearview mirror. “Our style is more to demand tribute from unaffiliated gambling operations happening within our turf, especially when they’re engaged in the more illegal stuff. And the problem is, we can’t figure out where these people are working from.”

“You can’t?”

“We’ve heard rumors for a while about a secret members-only casino. At first, most of us ignored it as an idle rumor. But after a while, we started losing more and more customers from both the tribute-paying operations and

our own direct gambling rings, so...”

“I see... I’m willing to hear more about this.”

According to Shiki’s explanation, the recent influx of believability in the Amphisbaena rumor came from an accidental leak of information from a frequent customer at one of the shady loan offices that the Awakusu-kai propped up. They put the screws on the guy and forced him to show them where the place was—only to find that it was merely a party space for rent. At the time they showed up, the place was holding an event hosted by a wedding planner.

They tried threatening the customer again, but he seemed baffled by the whole thing. The location where the casino set up had its own members mailing list, but the only things it mentioned were party events and nothing that identified the place as a gambling establishment.

Ordinarily, the building’s owners would never allow a client such rental space for gambling, but according to the man, this exclusive club didn’t allow you to cash your chips or even buy them with money in the first place.

“Ahh. So the money exchange happens somewhere else. Sounds just like one of the prize exchange businesses that pachinko parlors use to complete the loop,” Izaya said, a thin smile on his lips.

Shiki remained stone-faced. “There’s no exchange of chips at all, apparently. Everything is managed through smart cards. To the manager of the party space, it looks like they’re just playing some kind of tabletop video game event without any money involved.”

“Indeed.”

“If the police were handling this, they could just follow the message trail from the members, but for us to attempt the same thing, it’d be much trickier. They use some foreign servers in the process, and this isn’t a big enough deal for us to make contact with the local folks in our line of work overseas to handle,” Shiki explained with a little shrug, though his voice was still as sharp and hard as ever.

Izaya was not one to be cowed by intimidation, however. “Based on what you’re saying, it sounds like a pretty bold operation or at least a reckless one. Gambling electronically without physical chips? Anyone could raise a fuss any time they lose, claiming that the numbers were manipulated. ‘I don’t owe

you this much,' and so on."

"Precisely. But I suppose they've got some system to manage that... Amphisbaena's methods are extremely risky in every facet of their operation. They're not interested in mitigating their risks walking the tightrope; if anything, it appears as though they're not even aware how far there is to fall."

"And you want to smack them down to earth," Izaya said, with his biggest smile yet.

Shiki ignored him. "The guy we got this initial info from hasn't received any contact from their mailing list since. I find that strange, as if they somehow knew we were aware of them and just up and vanished. So now we've got to switch tactics."

"And so you turned to an outside freelancer like me. Very convenient, if you need to cut me loose."

"If this was just an issue within our own turf, we wouldn't need to go to such lengths. But when the rumors get around to the backyards of other Medei-gumi groups, the situation changes somewhat. At the very least, we've got to figure out if some other operation is backing these guys. Otherwise, all the local groups will fall into suspicion and backbiting."

He paused, then exhaled.

"In other words, I want you to get the scoop on these guys."



A few minutes earlier, Tokyo, on the street

"Hang on. Let's talk this over."

The message hovered in the palm of a figure wearing an all-black riding suit. Technically, on the screen of a PDA in said palm.

The rider sat atop a motorcycle with no headlight, no plates, and a thick black coloring that, like the rider's suit, practically absorbed the light. Even the frame and wheels were entirely black, making the whole thing look like the shadow of a bike that somehow turned three-dimensional.

But in contrast to the abnormal, almost mystical appearance of this motorcycle, the people standing before it couldn't have been more of a slap in the face from reality.

“Ah. You want to give up and call a lawyer now?”

Standing at the head of the group of motorcycle cops was a man who grinned down at the rider with predatory satisfaction. The rider in black shivered and typed another message into the PDA.

“F-from what I learned, within Tokyo limits, even when horses are treated as light vehicles, they’re not obligated to have lights on. And under the law entry for headlights, it says, ‘Horses and cows are excepted.’”

“Damn...you got me.”

“I got you...? You...you dirty cop! This is tyranny! False charges! You’re a disgrace to your profession!” accused the rider, suddenly all indignant fury.

The leader of the police group, Kinnosuke Kuzuhara, sneered. “Oh, so you’re going to keep claiming that thing’s a horse?”

“I’m glad you see things my way.”

Maybe this would actually work out, the rider thought with relief.

Kuzuhara gripped the handlebars of his vehicle and said, “And you’ve been riding this ‘horse,’ which we’ll classify as a light vehicle for the purposes of this argument, the same way that you would in traffic as a motorcycle?”

“Uh.”

“How many of the differences in traffic rules for light vehicles and two-wheeled vehicles can you name for me?”

“Umm...well.....”

More and more ellipses filled the rider’s PDA display, a sure indication of hesitation.

“Can you at least see that sign there?” Kuzuhara asked, pointing at a traffic sign with a 20 on it, indicating the speed limit in miles per hour. “Did you know that even a bicycle is required to follow the posted speed limit? And did you know that you were well over the limit when you were trying to get away from us just now?”

“...?!”

“You’ve got a lotta nerve, ignoring my commands to stop for a full five minutes. So let’s see some identifi— Ah! Hey!”

Without so much as a rumble of engine noise, the black motorcycle and its rider shot forward and peeled away.

Despite the eeriness of its totally silent progress, the traffic cops raced after it without hesitation, protecting the public streets of the nation’s capital with aplomb.

Even if their target was an inhuman monster.



Celty Sturluson was not human.

She was a type of fairy commonly known as a dullahan, found from Scotland to Ireland: a being who visits the homes of those close to death to inform them of their impending passing.

The dullahan carried its own severed head under its arm, rode on a two-wheeled carriage called a Coiste Bodhar that was pulled by a headless horse, and approached the homes of the soon to die. Anyone foolish enough to open the door was drenched with a basin full of blood. Thus the dullahan, like the banshee, made its name as a herald of ill fortune throughout European folklore.

One theory claimed that the dullahan bore a strong resemblance to the Norse Valkyrie, but Celty had no way of knowing if this was true.

It wasn't that she didn't know. More accurately, she just couldn't remember.

Someone back in her homeland had stolen her head, and she'd lost the memories of what she was. It was by following the faint trail of her head that she had come here to Ikebukuro.

Now with a motorcycle instead of a headless horse and a riding suit instead of armor, Celty had wandered the streets of this neighborhood for decades.

But ultimately, she had not succeeded at retrieving her head, and her memories were still lost.

However, Celty now knew who had stolen her head.

She even knew who was preventing her from finding it.

But that also meant she didn't know where it was.

And she was fine with that.

So long as she could live with those human beings whom she loved and those who accepted her, she could happily go on the way she was now.

She was a headless woman who let her actions speak for her missing face, someone who held this strong, secret conviction for happiness within her heart.

That was Celty Sturluson in a nutshell.



Tokyo, luxury sedan interior

This amalgamation of the abnormal, the Black Rider, shot past the car in which Izaya and Shiki sat.

Izaya watched the pack of biker cops race after her and grinned happily. “Look how hard the police’re working to protect us all. I feel safe in Tokyo today.”



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It almost sounded like a taunt in the direction of Shiki, who was a yakuza lieutenant, but he didn't appear bothered by it. Though he didn't go out of his way to agree with it, either.

"Ever since that particular officer showed up, it's been much more difficult to hire that courier."

"Kinnosuke Kuzuhara. I would assume that the name Kuzuhara is familiar to you folks."

"..."

"Who was it in the police's anti-yakuza task force? Yumeji Kuzuhara? I believe it was because of him that Mr. Kine ended up *kicked out of the Awakusu-kai*—"

Shiki cut him off midsentence. "Curiosity killed the snake, informant."

For the first time, Shiki spoke not with detached civility but with the direct bluntness of one at least a dozen years older than the listener. But there was no anger in his voice—if anything, Shiki was smiling. Still, his words were heavy, sharp—dangerous.

Izaya remained as aloof and natural as ever in the face of the thick, overbearing menace across from him. "Oh, I think you mean cat, Mr. Shiki," he prodded.

"In the West, they say a cat has nine lives...but the snake is a symbol of immortality and eternal rebirth, isn't it? Seems fitting for you, the way you can get beaten and stabbed and just shrug off a layer of skin before coming back."

"...You're better read than I would have expected, Mr. Shiki," Izaya sniped. "Do you enjoy manga?"

Shiki ignored him. "I don't care about your philosophies. The only thing we need to know is whether you ingest the lesson or if you keep it on your tongue until you spit it out. That's all."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Curiosity might kill the cat after nine tries, but *unnecessary* curiosity will require a slightly more elaborate punishment, informant."

"..."

A brief instant of silence.

"Now let's return to the topic of the job," Shiki said mechanically, as if his brief foray into poetics had never happened. "There is one piece of information we have gleaned about Amphisbaena already."

"Which is?"

“Are you familiar with our guy Akabayashi?” Shiki asked. Akabayashi was a particularly combat-minded lieutenant in the Awakusu-kai.

“Yes, he’s the one who sponsors Jan-Jaka-Jan, isn’t he? From what I hear, for being such a hard-liner, he’s really softened his tune lately.”

“You never know; he could just be hiding his claws. And surely a man who makes his living collecting information wouldn’t be naive enough to expect that *softness equates to safety*.”

“Good point. So...what is it about Mr. Akabayashi?” Izaya wondered, his eyes glinting with the exact type of unnecessary curiosity that Shiki had just warned him about.

“While you were out of the picture following your stabbing, he had a bit of a tussle with the younger folk. Some stupid college kids cooking up their own homemade drugs and selling them. Akabayashi managed to stomp them flat, but we still haven’t caught whoever was putting them up to this in the first place.”

“And you think it was Amphisbaena who was supplying them?” Izaya asked, putting two and two together. But Shiki’s answer was not what he expected.

“No...but it’s possible that whoever it is, they’re beefing with Amphisbaena.”

“Oh?”

“We caught one of the low-level dealers. He claimed he was told to search for Amphisbaena by the guys in charge. Though we have no idea how much they actually know about the little snakes, either.”

“I see. And is researching this dealing operation part of the job?” Izaya asked.

It was a perfectly reasonable question, but Shiki just shook his head and handed Izaya an envelope. The younger man took it, looked inside to confirm the presence of multiple Yukichi Fukuzawas looking back at him from their ten thousand-yen bills, then stuffed it into his summer coat pocket.

Once Shiki was satisfied that the other man had accepted the money, he answered the question.

“We are looking into the drug operation through a different avenue, so it’s not necessary to focus on them. However, if it gets out that we’re feeling for Amphisbaena, that might cause this other group to fall under scrutiny, too. Please be careful about that possibility.”

Izaya looked away, a sign that he wasn’t interested in any further talk—

until another question occurred to him.

“And what’s that other avenue, by the way?”

The only response he got was Shiki’s sharp, heavy grin. “What did I just tell you about unnecessary curiosity?”

“Point taken. I won’t ask you about it, and if I decide I *want* to know, I’ll do that on my own.”

“...”

“I’d rather not be turned into grilled snake just yet, after all.”

A few minutes later, the car arrived at its destination in Ikebukuro. Izaya stuck his right hand into his coat pocket and reached for the door handle with his left.

“Normally, you drop me off at the same spot where you pick me up, but not this time,” the young man said boldly.

The Awakusu-kai lieutenant didn’t bat an eye. “Oh, the reason for that is simple. I’m only dropping you off here *since I have an errand to run*.”

“?”

Izaya opened the door and got out, wondering what he meant by that.

There was a girl standing there.

“...”

She was at least a dozen years younger than him.

Taking a moment, Izaya noticed where the car had stopped.

There was a large sign reading RAKUEI GYM, and the building under it was bustling with the sounds of chants and slapping sandbags.

Over his shoulder, Izaya heard Shiki say, “I’m just picking up the boss’s daughter while I’m here.”

He looked down at the girl before him, who had her *dogi* uniform rolled up and slung over her back. He recognized her.

Akane Awakusu.

The girl who once attempted to kill Shizuo Heiwajima, due to Izaya’s own plotting.

Shiki glared back and forth between Akane’s stunned features and Izaya’s back. The Awakusu yakuza squeezed the steering wheel and swallowed.

But the only recognition that passed between the two of them fell on *Izaya's side*.

“Hi there, nice to meet you! You must be Akane Awakusu, huh?” he said, as if it were perfectly ordinary for someone to be on a first-name basis with the daughter of a yakuza boss.

“Huh? Er, um...yes!” the girl said, initially startled, then suspicious. But as soon as she noticed Shiki in the car behind Izaya, relief came over her features.

Shiki asked the girl, “Is this the first time you’ve met him, miss?”

“Yes. Um, I’m Akane Awakusu. Nice to meet you!” she said, a bit nervous but without any hint of deception. It was the kind of nerves some people would have upon meeting a stranger, nothing else.

Shiki examined her expression closely, then told Izaya, “Well, remember our work arrangement.”

“Indeed. I should get on that now.”

As Izaya left, he brushed Akane’s head. She looked at the stranger’s face, all curious confusion, then promptly forgot about him as she headed into the car.

Got to be careful around Shiki. He’s too sharp, thought Izaya once the car had rolled away. *It’s a damn good thing I never messed with Akane in person.*

He thought of how he had manipulated Akane to make her want to kill Shizuo, and he grinned to himself. Then there was that poor sap *who had used the name Izaya to make contact with Akane on his orders*. His grin grew into a beaming smile.

The same way a cat person might beam at the sight of kittens playing.

Chat room

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The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

100% Pure Water has entered the chat.

100% Pure Water: Yep, nobody's around during the day!

100% Pure Water: I suppose everyone must be busy!

100% Pure Water: I feel kind of lonely...

100% Pure Water: Actually, which members are the originals? Kanra, Setton, TarouTanaka, Bacura, Saika, Kuru, and Mai?

100% Pure Water: How is it that all of you came to know each other?

100% Pure Water: Are you friends in real life or just online acquaintances? I'm curious.

100% Pure Water: I came on Kuru's invitation, so I'm kind of like IRL friends with Kuru and Mai, but even they won't tell me who everyone is. Maybe they don't actually know anyone here.

Bacura has entered the chat.

Bacura: The call went out, and here I am.

100% Pure Water: Whoa! Wild, were you spying on the place?

Bacura: Where there are girls,

Bacura: There are guys checking them out. Such is the privilege of Team Boys!

100% Pure Water: Oh, geez, are you sure I'm a girl? I could just be playing one online!

Bacura: Actually,

Bacura: There's always the possibility that Sharo or Kid are girls, you know.

100% Pure Water: Ah yes. Because we don't know each other's identities.

100% Pure Water: But if Sharo was a girl, that would be quite a gap between appearances and reality. (lol)

Bacura: Hey, I get moe for the gap.

100% Pure Water: Are you one of those people who uses the word "moe," then?

Bacura: I'll do anything to keep the conversation going with a girl.

100% Pure Water: No, really, are you actually monitoring this chat room all the time?

Bacura: Well,

Bacura: I've got a program set up to alert me whenever someone logs in.

100% Pure Water: I don't believe this! How much do you love this chat room anyway?!

100% Pure Water: Wait, is it possible you've got your mind set on someone in this chat group? No, that's not possible. You've already got Saki!

Bacura: No idea what you mean.

100% Pure Water: Oh, come on! It's totally obvious from your interactions! Did you think nobody could tell?!

Bacura: I reserve the right to remain silent.

100% Pure Water: Hmph. Then I suppose I won't ask!

100% Pure Water: In that case, do you have any real friends from the old guard?

Bacura: Whoa, whoa,

Bacura: Let's not do this.

Bacura: It's not cool to pry into each other's private lives.

100% Pure Water: I didn't realize you were so uptight. Don't you get curious? Don't you wonder about the people on the other side of the screen?

Bacura: Some things you're better off not learning.

Bacura: And if things are going well here,

Bacura: Then there's no need to go digging any deeper.

Bacura: So long!

Bacura has left the chat.

100% Pure Water: He's gone.

100% Pure Water: But what if he really is thinking about someone else here?

100% Pure Water: On another topic, TarouTanaka hasn't shown up in here lately.

100% Pure Water: TarouTanaka, if you're watching, please come back to us. ☆

100% Pure Water: I bet you'd like to be introduced to the newcomers!

100% Pure Water: Well, that's all from me!

100% Pure Water has left the chat.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

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In a Dark Place 2

“But still...you must have done *some* research into us, right?” Earthworm said, her voice bright in the dim room. “About Amphisbaena?”

There was no thought for hiding the identity of the group, suggesting that the burlap sack covering the man’s head wasn’t meant for that purpose.

“Well? Were you or weren’t you snooping on us?”

“...”

“Didn’t you think what you were doing was dangerous?”

“...”

Still there was no sound coming from the sack but breathing and no vocalization.

“Were you thinking we weren’t yakuza, and therefore, we’d be nicer... and wouldn’t bother to abduct you?”

“...”

“Nope, nope, no—no—no, nuh-uh, no way! You’re a disgrace to your profession. Don’t you know young folks snap easily these days? We’ve got calcium deficiency. The fourteen and unders are killin’ it up in the killing fields, knowing they’re protected from the death penalty by juvenile law. But I’m in my twenties, so whatever. On the inside, I’m eternally that little boy smushing ants on the playground, got it? But don’t worry—I’m a girl. A girl with the mentality of a little boy. Isn’t that cute?”

“...”

Even these taunts did not elicit a reaction from the sack.

“I wonder, Izaya Orihara. Can you even hear me?” she wheedled, poking at the sack. “Want me to take this off?”

“...”

The man’s head rose slightly, turning in the direction of her voice.

“Ooh, he reacted! Hey, can you bob your head for me?”

The man with the burlap sack on his head shook it up and down with a vigor he hadn’t shown thus far.

“Ha-ha! You’re finally looking lively again. Too bad I’m not gonna take the sack off,” Earthworm gloated, her narrowed eyes appearing to drown in pleasure. She grabbed his nose through the rough fabric. “It’s scarier than you thought to have a bag over your head the entire time, isn’t it?”

“...”

“It’s dark, all the smells and sounds are muffled, you can’t eat anything, and your breath makes everything stuffy and damp. I wonder if it would smell if you ate garlic beforehand. But I doubt you’d have that problem, since you seem like you’d be obsessed with preventing bad breath. I’ve seen pictures of you, and you’re always looking cool and suave.”

She wasn’t giving away the full breadth of her information about him, just delivering enough to make him uneasy.

“But that burlap sack is scary, right? I tried it myself, and I couldn’t take more than five seconds. I was terrified it would ruin my makeup.”

She flicked the forehead of her captive through the cloth.

“I’m sorry that we’re just so devastatingly fascinating and cute that you couldn’t help but try to research us,” she said theatrically. “But you see, our owner really hates being spied on like this. Personally, I’d love to show you more and more of what you want to see, but I can’t disobey the owner. It’s the tragedy of the employee, you know?”

“...”

“Quiet again? Wait, you haven’t said anything to begin with. I’d kind of like to hear something, even if it’s just a scream.”

Earthworm reached over to a nearby table and picked up a pair of scissors, then closed the blades loudly next to the sack, *snip, snip*.

Their captive leaned away to avoid the shears, but Earthworm continued her torment, moving the blades closer.

“But it’s a good thing not to speak, huh? I just accidentally mentioned the owner, so you’ve probably figured out there’s someone higher than me in this organization.”

“...”

“I guess that makes you a successful info broker, huh? Not talking is the best choice.” Earthworm chuckled.

She sat back down, and her voice cold and hard this time, she warned, “But it’s not going to work. Nope, nuh-uh. You might be able to hold your silence, but we already know everything there is to know about you.”

Cruelty shone in her eyes, and her lips turned up in sadistic pleasure. “Your dear daddy and mummy are doing financial business overseas, aren’t they?”

“...”

“Obviously, we can’t just fly over there to see them...but you do have

two darling little sisters close by. Kururi and Mairu, I believe?”

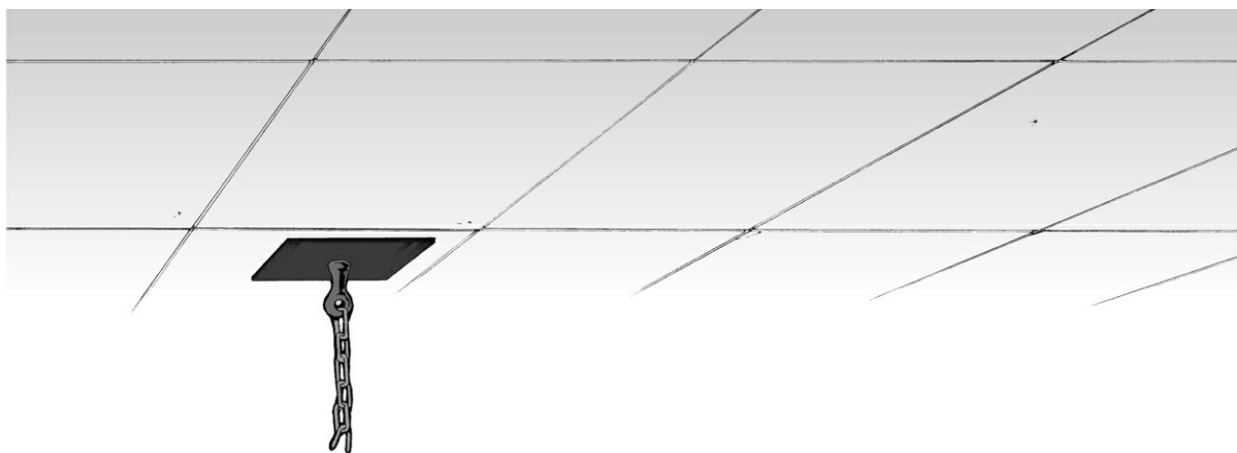
The man lifted his head.

A pitiable prisoner, shaking in denial.

Earthworm leaned forward, unable to help herself from squirming with affection for her miserable prey. Her words were cold.

“My friend is going to pick them up now. I’m sure you must be very happy to see them soon, Big Brother Izaya.”

Again, time retreated several days to earlier in this tale...



CHAPTER 2 Iza



Chapter 2: Iza

Along Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

"Today was just terrible..."

Celty was typing onto the computer screen, while it was her live-in partner, Shinra Kishitani, whose voice actually filled the room.

"Are you all right, Celty?! Your sadness is my sadness! As the saying goes, 'A wife's words can move mountains,' which means the woman of the house actually has the most say in everything! I know we haven't had a wedding yet, but you are essentially my wife, and your laments have my heart twisted in agonizing knots! But, Celty, you're...*koff...ugh...*"

It was Shinra's usual sort of rant but delivered without his usual intensity. His voice gave out abruptly, and Celty raced over to him to see what was the matter.

"Oh, sorry, Celty. It's all right; I just got a glob of saliva down my windpipe..."

"Oh...that's good. I'm sorry—I shouldn't be complaining when you're in this state..."

She was looking down at her partner, who was completely bedridden.

After a recent attack, Shinra was left with broken bones all over and significant internal damage. He had spent a full week at the Nebula Medical Research Facility before he was declared stable enough to recover at home.

Normally, he should have been at a regular hospital, but as a black market doctor, Shinra's apartment already had some medical devices. Plus, this way he didn't have to answer any uncomfortable questions.

He was able to hold conversations as usual, but everything else required Celty's help, plus the occasional extra hand from his stepmother, Emilia.

Things were tough for Shinra. Celty hadn't been able to figure out how the bedpan worked at first, so she'd just lifted him entirely over to the bathroom with her shadows. When she'd tried to cook porridge for him, the result had been more like a burned cracker. But by now, things had settled

down, and life was returning to normal for Celty, bit by bit.

That didn't mean she was mentally back to her regular self, however.

"I'll work to make up for your absence, Shinra!" she claimed and rushed off to run jobs between her shifts attending to him—though that was really just an excuse to get outside.

Celty's real goal was to gather information about whoever had attacked Shinra. Her driving force was the rage she felt at her beloved being injured. Perhaps sensing what was going on with her, Shinra did his best to look lively and happy.

"But the traffic cops are out in force these days, so you should be even more careful than usual."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"There's not a single thing for you to apologize for! If anything, I should apologize for not being able to jump up and hold you!"

As a matter of fact, the first time he tried to force himself up to leap on Celty, he doubled over in pain and heard the sounds of his own body creaking under the pressure of his weight. Once Celty threatened to leave him if he kept hurting himself, he finally calmed down and behaved.

Shinra was flat on his back with a special kind of bed desk that allowed him to use the computer from a prone position so that he could see the record of Celty's messages. He grinned happily.

"I'm so glad you came back safe and sound, though. That knowledge is the best medicine I could have, Celty."

"Shinra..."

"Even these last few days, hearing you talk about what happened outside really eases the pain for me. From Shizuo's impostor to the girl with pyrokinesis, the ordinary stuff and the weird stuff—it's like you're taking me to all these different worlds through your stories. It's silly for a doctor to claim that illness starts in the mind, but I really feel like you're the best medicine I could ever have."

His words were more wonderful than Celty could process but also more gut-wrenching.

Shinra's injuries were far more serious than his smiles would suggest. Nebula's experimental painkillers should have been easing most of the pain, but the injuries themselves weren't going to heal anytime soon.

It could be a month until full recovery—or three or maybe six. Would there be lingering effects? Celty knew nothing about medicine, so she

couldn't say.

What have I been doing all this time...?

Couldn't she have worked as Shinra's assistant in his illegal doctoring business rather than running courier jobs? That would have at least given her some skills that might have come in handy now.

The emotions that came over her were wild and conflicting: Each time, it was Shinra's words that eased her mind but also gripped her conscience with guilt. However, Shinra never demanded any responsibility from Celty. He could sense her anguish and tried to steer the conversation away from touchy topics in a subtle attempt to show her she wasn't at fault for what had happened.

"Maybe I had this coming."

"Coming...? What do you mean? Yeah, what you do for a living is illegal, but the punishment for that happens when you get arrested and sentenced. You aren't hurting people...well, except for the time you did surgery on Mika's face...and all the other bad stuff you've done...But... anyway, if you turn yourself in, then I'll summon my courage and surrender to that cop, as frightening as it is to me! We'll be in prison together!"

"...Prisons aren't coed, Celty."

"No way!" she hastily typed.

Shinra's expression softened, and he explained, "I meant, maybe I had it coming because of Izaya."

"Izaya?"

"When he got stabbed and hospitalized, he called me, and I basically shut him down, didn't I? My friend got stabbed, and I hardly felt any concern for him at all. So I probably had this coming."

"No way...Izaya totally earned what he got! Everybody hates him for a reason! He practically wears karma as an outfit every day he steps outside!"

It was an odd analogy, but Shinra merely chuckled and looked up at the ceiling. "I suppose you're right. And I doubt that Izaya expects he'll live to die of old age."

"Of course not."

"And yet, he's still one of the few friends I have..."

"I feel like the problem is that you're friends with him in the first place...", Celty said, then realized that the man she was talking to was in love with her—a headless monster—and she mimicked heaving a sigh.

"Okay, you've known Izaya since you were both in middle school,

right?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know much about him at that age... Was he always like that?”

“Ah. I’m not sure what to say. In middle school, Izaya was the type not to make contact with others. Even now, I doubt he has anyone he can truly speak the honest truth to,” Shinra said, face pensive as he considered the friend he’d known for over a decade. “I’d bet I’m the one he’s actually talked to longest, over the course of his life...”

“So I suppose the only people who would know the younger Izaya better than I do would be...his family.”



Ikebukuro, near Rakuei Gym

“Hey, Big Brother Iza! Die!” a cheerful voice called out.

Simultaneously, a foot launched itself at the back of Izaya’s neck in a vicious high kick.

“...!”

He dodged it in the nick of time and sighed, his usual detached smirk gone. “I can’t believe you’d tell your own immediate family member to die. It’s so sad. Since when did you get to be one of those inmates in the asylum of our depraved, detached modern society, Mairu?”

“Wow, I can’t believe I’m being lectured by illness in human form! And you’re not supposed to dodge!” grumbled a girl with a braid, dressed in a black karate *gi*. A moment later, another girl in regular clothes appeared.

“...Brother... Well...?” [Big Brother, how are you doing?]

“My own sister just tried to break my neck. How do you think I am?” Izaya replied.

The girl with the glasses dressed for karate—Mairu Orihara—puffed out her cheeks. “Well, Shizuo said that if you went crashing into a dump truck with a smile on your face, he’d introduce us to Yuuhei! I was just trying to see if there was a way to fake it and fool him!”

“Well, this is remarkable. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone killing their own brother as a means of meeting a celebrity.”

“Hey, you might not actually die! Shizuo could get run over by a dump truck and survive!”

“Please don’t act like every person is a talking golem made of steel like he is—and that might be paying him a compliment he doesn’t deserve. At any rate, you’d better get out of the middle of the street or a car will hit you well before any dump trucks come along.” Izaya played the brotherly role, concealing his disgust at the mention of Shizuo’s name with nothing more than narrowed eyes.

That was careless of me. When he dropped me off at Rakuei Gym, I should have imagined that Mairu would be here, Izaya thought, annoyed at himself.

His sisters glared at him. “All I did was head outside to make sure Akane left safely, and then you’re getting out of the Awakusu-kai’s car like that! Whatever happened to all the excitement about you possibly getting buried in the mountains?!” Mairu protested.

The other girl, Kururi Orihara, looked away and mumbled, “...Further... Sisters... Passed...” [Plus, you didn’t even notice us.]

“Hey, you two are doing all kinds of stuff behind my back, aren’t you? How much is Namie paying you? This is why giving kids big allowances is a bad idea.”



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“You can’t lecture me about that, Bro, not after you made a bunch of money running a gambling ring for baseball during middle school!” Mairu shot back, sticking her tongue out like a child.

Kururi hesitantly dipped her tongue out as well. Izaya groaned.

“I can’t imagine who influenced you to turn out so twisted,” he mumbled to himself. “On the other hand, viewed objectively, you make quite interesting observation subjects—”

He suddenly noticed something odd.

Mairu and Kururi were both looking behind him, mouths open as if to grunt in surprise.

“...!”

His honed instincts told him to spin around. And not just turn but to lean his center of gravity so that he could leap out of the way.

His decision was the correct one.

Before he even saw anything, the shift in the air told the hair on his skin about its presence.

A roundhouse kick toward his face.

His instincts had warned him of the oncoming attack before his sense of reason did. And this kick was several times more powerful than the one Mairu had just tried to use on him.

As his front half snapped backward like a spring, he sensed the shoe of the kicker grazing the tip of his nose. Just that sensation alone was enough to make half his face go numb, but he couldn’t stop there.

Izaya chose to escape via the ground, laying his body horizontal and tumbling to the asphalt like a gymnast. Immediately, a series of heels struck the ground, following his path as he rolled. It was like a scene from some Jackie Chan movie.

Within a few seconds, Izaya was back on his feet some distance away, a knife now in his hands. He looked at his attacker cautiously but wore a smile on his lips. “Ah, good. From the look on my sisters’ faces, I thought it might be Shizu at first.”

“I see. And will that be your last will and testament?” said his opponent, a man in a black *dogi* with facial stubble.

Mairu spoke to the man with obvious familiarity. “Master, why are you out here?”

“You girls stay back. I’m going to kick your brother to the curb. I don’t think you want to see your family member beat to crap.”

The man—Mairu's martial arts teacher, Eijirou Sharaku—cracked his neck and took a threatening step toward Izaya.

"Who, this guy? We don't care..."

"...Affirmed..." [Yeah.]

"I guess it was foolish of me to expect familial love from either of you," Izaya snapped, his cheek twitching.

But his sisters weren't done. "But to you, me and Kuru and Mom and Dad are no better than strangers when it comes to your targets for observation, aren't we? If you're going to treat all of humanity exactly the same, you can't expect your family to love you back!"

"...Sad..." [What a sad man.]

"This isn't the time or place for that— *Whoa!*"

He had to lean away to avoid another fierce kick from Eijirou. They were attacks that any beginner to martial arts would be helpless to stop, but with all his concentration focused on the task, Izaya was just able to dodge and hold a conversation at the same time.

"Doesn't seem to reflect well on your profession that you're attacking an amateur out on the street, Eijirou."

"So, you're going to claim that a guy who can dodge my attacks and carries a knife around with him is just a harmless amateur?"

There was naked, deadly malice in the karate master's repeated attacks, but his face didn't reflect it. His eyes were tired and annoyed, as if everything in the world was just a bother to him. "And what kind of guy forgets what he did to a man's beloved sister and just strolls right past that man's dojo expecting to be treated well?" he snapped.

"It's a public street, isn't it? And I don't remember any permanent scars being left on Mikage."

"Whether you violated her or not isn't the point. It was that damn mouth of yours that caused her to quit school! Or have you forgotten about that?"

He wasn't Shizuo Heiwajima, but Eijirou Sharaku was certainly dangerous to cross.

And more to the point, if Shizu spots me getting into trouble here, I'm screwed.

He knew it was time to extract himself from the situation and decided to exploit his foe through dialogue.

"If you want me to feel the same way you did, then I'm not the target of your revenge. It should be my sisters, right? Just go to them and use your

clever wits to convince them to do whatever it is you want. Then you might just get me to double over.” Izaya chuckled.

“How could you, Big Brother Iza?! You’d sell your own sisters?! Plus, doubling over is what you do when you’re laughing!”

“...Sinister...” [You’re the worst.]

“And this is coming from the sister who told me to die so that she could meet her favorite celebrity.” Izaya snorted.

But Eijirou did not find any of this funny. He glared at the other man with those sluggish eyes of his.

“I wouldn’t dare mess with a precious pupil of mine, even if they’re related to the scum of the earth.”

“Master...”

“And in another five years, when your body has properly ripened, then I might think about it!”

“Amazing work, Master! You shifted my opinion of you from shining to rock-bottom in three seconds!”

Eijirou did not reply to Mairu’s “encouragement.” Instead, he assumed the odd, unique stance of the Rakuei Dojo, preparing to continue to assault—when a third party’s roundhouse kick hit him on the back of the head.

“*Gwuh?!*”

The kick wasn’t at full power, so Eijirou merely fell forward rather than passing out. When he understood who’d kicked him, he shouted, “M-Mikage! What the hell was that for?! Don’t tell me you’ve still got a thing for him!”

It was a tomboyish woman with short, spiky hair. There was cool anger in her expression as she surveyed her older brother and said, “Listen to you, out in public yelling about me being violated or whatever... Are you simply the type of person who cannot learn the concept of delicacy and propriety unless it kills you?”

“N-no, wait! I understand the theory that the only good me is a dead me, but are you sure it’s true?! Consider the source of your information before you allow false rumors to lead you astray!”

“Shut up, you moron. Fighting in the middle of the street? Are you completely dedicated to destroying our reputation?”

“Oh, and I suppose sucker kicking your brother in the back of the head makes you a paragon of honor?!” Eijirou protested as he got to his feet.

“A martial artist should be on battle footing in all his daily endeavors, right? You’re going to complain that you couldn’t sense a sneak attack?”

“You think that means you’re allowed to just do anything you want to me?! What’s next? Are you gonna headshot me with a rifle from a rooftop and say, ‘This is a battle, not a game. Guns are fair play’?! I suppose then some little kid could light Traugott’s house on fire, and that would make him the new fighting champion of the world! Wow, this be-ready-at-all-times philosophy sure is wild! Wait, where was I going with this...?”

“First of all, he would just walk out of the flames unsinged, and he’d also dodge any bullet. Plus, none of those arguments are a defense for why you let yourself get hit by my attack, nor are they excuses for the way you just humiliated me in public,” Mikage said, sound effects of menace practically visible in the air behind her.

“Wait, Mikage! There’s just one thing I want to get straight first.”

“...What is it?” she asked, pausing in her approach when she saw how serious her brother looked.

“Are you saying...you’ve never been with a man?”

“...”

“Not even a kiss?”

“...”

““...””

Mikage said nothing. Mairu and Kururi also awaited the answer with bated breath.

But what emerged from Mikage’s mouth was not related to the question.

“Die.”

“You’d tell your own brother to d— *Whoa!*”

Eijirou parried the fist that came rushing for his Adam’s apple, but that was only the first of a series of blows to his vital points from every limb Mikage had.

“Hey, whoa, geez—dang, is there no end to this combo? Come on, wow, what was that? Was that new?! Does it have a name like ‘Something or Other Dance’ or ‘Flowing Purgatory’ or something! Yow! Yow! Yow!”

Mikage executed a combination of attacks that never stopped, and Eijirou accurately parried them all as he jabbed at her. Mairu and Kururi watched this choreographed sibling argument, entranced, until they remembered their own brother was here.

Except that when they looked around, he wasn’t anymore. There were only casual observers, taking in the spectacle from a safe distance.



Along Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment,

“...And that's what Izaya's sisters are like. I bet even he thinks they're more than he can handle.”

“I've never heard of twins who were so...fictional...,” Celty typed, hardly able to believe the stories Shinra was telling her.

“I think it was about the time we were at Raijin High that Kururi and Mairu became the way they are now. They were still early in elementary school at that point.”

“Oh.”

“I bet even Izaya understands that his sisters are the way they are partially due to his influence,” Shinra said, reminiscing. Celty was sitting with her legs folded next to his head, affording him a glimpse of knees and thighs. Her shadow-made riding suit was 100 percent flush to her skin, making her silhouette very accurate to the flesh. The sight was making Shinra fidgety.

“What do you suppose Izaya said to his twin sisters when they were just about to start grade school? He said, ‘You're identical in every way. Is there even a point to living the exact same life?’ And he did it in a way that five-year-old girls would understand.”

“Sounds like he got himself up to some shenanigans that any set of twins in the nation would strangle him for...”

“Actually, I don't think he bore them any malice as twins. He probably just wanted to see them look depressed or start fighting or something. Not to hurt them but just because he wanted to see it.”

“I know you think that's vouching for him, but it only makes him sound worse...,” said Celty's message, typed from the PDA and traveling through the home network to the screen of the laptop that Shinra could see from his bed. This made the conversation smoother, as she didn't have to show him her PDA each time.

“But where Izaya went wrong is that he didn't realize the girls were more abnormal than he thought.”

“Abnormal?”

“They split up their personal features by rolling dice, hoping to be a

combination of only good things. They believed that people help fill in each other's flaws. The impressive thing is that they've been trying it for a decade now."

"It's kind of...touching? Should I be saying that?" Celty wondered, crossing her arms.

Shinra stared at the ceiling for a while, then conjectured, "Maybe...they were hoping Izaya would like them, at the beginning."

"What?"

"Sometimes the only thing worse than anger from a family member is disappointment. My dad often said that the disappointment he sensed from me and my mom was really hard, every time he experienced it."

Celty thought of Shinra's father—a freakish man who wore a white gas mask everywhere—and typed gingerly, *"Well...he certainly does a lot to make himself a disappointment."*

"When you've got young girls who are looking up to their much older brother, and he asks them, 'What's the point of being a twin?' you can bet they're going to do whatever they can to win his favor."

"So you're saying they tried to become complete human beings to make their brother happy?" Celty guessed.

Shinra nodded as best as he could from a prone position, then winced. "It feels like they mixed up the means and the end at some point. They're so obsessed with being the perfect person that they've already drifted away from Izaya. As proof of that, now they're fawning over Yuuhei Hanejima, the perfect superhuman. Honestly, it's a waste for them to be stuck in the palm of Izaya's hand anyway."

"Well, I don't know much about those twins, but if you say so, then I'm sure it's true. Then again, I don't know who is suited to dancing on Izaya's palm."

"Are you sure? Couldn't that be what we've been doing all along?"

"If it happens, I'll jam my scythe into the tender flesh under his fingernails," she typed.

"You're quite the extremist." Shinra laughed, but her reply caught him by surprise.

"I'll make sure I free you from the palm of his hand, even if I can't join you. Don't worry, Shinra."

For a moment, Shinra's mouth hung agape as he tried to process that statement.

Then it sank in. He mulled it over in his head, and his sense of reason crumbled.

"Celtyyy! Please, you can't talk about leaving me alone; it's just too saaa-agh!"

Shinra?!

He bolted upright, shrieking, and Celty had to forget about her typing to hold his body still.

"Ouch... I can't imagine a world with you-oogh... Parting is such bitter sorrow...hrg... Despair..."

"Just stop moving! Look, I'm sorry! I think I understand what you mean! I was just kidding! We'll run away together! Together forever! Just stop worrying!" she typed frantically into her PDA and thrust it in Shinra's face. Meanwhile, her shadow was busy cradling Shinra's body firmly under the blanket.

"I'm sorry, Celty. I'm calm now, I'm calm now..."

The slapstick routine was heartwarming in a way, but the sound of Shinra's agonized groans refused to leave Celty's mind.

"Just leave all the chores to me and focus on resting. I've cleared things up with the Awakusu-kai, so they're not going to rush any of their patients to you."

"Don't overwork yourself, either, Celty."

"I'm fine. I'm turning down any jobs that would keep me away from home for long periods."

Just then, Celty's PDA buzzed with the ringtone she used for messenger jobs. It was a new line of work for her, and the clients who used it were very limited in number.

She felt a streak of extreme foreboding. The idiom *speak of the devil* flashed through her mind, which seemed to suggest that Shinra's way of thinking had infected her—and one glance at the screen showed her that the premonition was correct.

The name *Izaya Orihara* was displayed there. Reluctantly, she replied to the message.

Celty@MonHun Long Sword Main: What do you want?

Izaya Orihara: ...Are you playing a video game?

Then Celty realized her handle name was still set up for the sake of her online game friends, and she hurriedly fixed the text string.

Celty@: It's not what you think. Shinra's the crafter and gunner; I just use my sword to cut off the tails.

Izaya Orihara: I don't know what you're talking about.

Realizing how completely confused she was, she frantically sat up, took the time that a normal human being would use to breathe deeply, then corrected herself.

Celty@Actual Work: Sorry. What do you want?

Izaya Orihara: You seem strangely adept at changing your username. Anyway, I wanted to hire you for a job.

Celty@Actual Work: I decline.

Izaya Orihara: I wish you wouldn't be so dismissive of me.

Celty@Temporarily Closed: I don't have time to take on your shady jobs. Sorry.

Izaya Orihara: Well, well.

Izaya Orihara: Too busy taking care of Shinra, perhaps?

Celty went still.

...How does Izaya know about Shinra's injuries? I mean, he is an info dealer, but...did Shinra tell him himself?

While she mulled this over, Izaya continued messaging.

Izaya Orihara: Based on the delay in your response, I've got a guess as to what you're thinking.

Izaya Orihara: "How does he know that Shinra is hurt?"

Celty@Temporarily Closed: What's going on? Are you involved in this?

Celty@Temporarily Closed: If tha

Celty@Temporarily Closed: If that's the case, I'll sew your eyes and mouth shut with shadow and hand you over to Shizuo.

Izaya Orihara: Let's not get hasty. Type calmly, please. And by the way, it wasn't me. Even I'm not stupid enough to attempt to maim or kill one of the few friends I have.

Izaya Orihara: But I am an info dealer, so I do have some level of insight as to who and how you might've been targeted. I might be able to strike a little deal.

Celty@Temporarily Closed: Really?

Izaya Orihara: Of course, you'll have to run a little job for me in return.

Celty@Temporarily Closed: You're going to give me information on the guy who hurt your own friend as payment for running a job for you?!

Izaya Orihara: Well, I'm sticking my neck out doing this. I'm not running a charity.

Izaya Orihara: So what do you say? Interested in hearing more?

Celty@Temporarily Closed: What time and place?

“What’s the matter, Celty?” Shinra asked, seeing her frozen in place with the PDA in hand. “It’s Izaya, isn’t it? Is he asking you to do another crazy job?”

“Well, it is from Izaya, but it doesn’t seem to be a big deal. I’m going to step out for a bit.”

“Um, Celty...?” he called out. She was getting up in a hurry. “Did Izaya say something to you?”

“Uh, I just told you... He’s got a job for me.”

“May I see your PDA?”

“How do you think you’re reading this?” Celty replied, nonplussed.

But Shinra’s expression was quite serious. “No, I want you to show me the messages you were just trading with him.”

“You want to violate my privacy? What, do you think I’m cheating on you with Izaya?”

“...Celty...you know I can tell when you’re lying, right?” he said simply, but there was power and a kind of sadness to his words.

“...Well...all right.”

Celty was perfectly capable of leaving with her secret intact, but she couldn’t just turn her back on Shinra after hearing that tone in his voice. She gave up, switched the PDA screen over to the message history, and showed it to him.

“...Figures. I knew it was something like that.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you’d try to stop me, so...”

“Well, of course I would...but then you’d just say sorry and rush out the door, wouldn’t you?”

“...I’m sorry,” she said, shriveling as she realized he could completely see through her.

But Shinra only gazed warmly at her, a soft smile on his lips.

“On the other hand, I’m used to getting dragged around by his wicked schemes. It’s been happening since middle school.”

“Huh?”

“I’d like to know the reason I was attacked, too...but I don’t want to place any burden on you. So I was going to stop you at first, but if that won’t work, then I’m going along with it.”

Indeed, there was nothing but acceptance in his features. Slowly, he raised his bandaged body, grimacing with pain, and traced the nape of Celty’s

neck.

“Let’s show whoever broke in here what we’re made of—together. I can’t move from this spot, but I can at least use my brain.”

“But if it really is one of Izaya’s schemes...”

“Like I just said, if we’re only dancing on the palm of Izaya’s hand, then at least I’m with you, Celty.”

“Shinra...”

Warmth filled the space between them. Shinra could have stayed there for an eternity, but he had one thing he needed to set straight.

“Promise me, Celty. If you find out who the attacker was, don’t go charging in alone. You must return here at least once. Even if Izaya brings you a guy standing right there and says he’s the one.”

“And what will happen if I break this promise? Will you decide you hate me?” she asked, even though she had no intention of breaking it.

Shinra’s head shook left and right. “I would never hate you, would I?”

“What would you do, then?”

“If you break this promise...”

“Then what...?”

Shinra paused before describing her penalty.

“There will be...tears.”

“Huh?”

“Much wailing...and gnashing of teeth...by me.”

“By you?!” she quickly wrote, but he didn’t appear to be joking.

“Yes. If you betrayed me, I would be heartbroken! A man in his midtwenties would be wailing and blubbering! Sagamihara downstairs is going to come up and ask what all the fuss is about! Do you want to see a grown man acting this way?”

“Um, I’ll admit it. I don’t wish to see that...”

She leaned sideways, unsure of how to react. After Shinra’s next statement, her backbone turned to ice.

“Also, I can complain to your online game friends and make things very uncomfortable in your little guild.”

“Understood. I will keep my promise. Rest assured of that,” Celty replied at once. She briskly prepared to leave, then headed out of the apartment.

She had to admit that Shinra’s final penalty was very harsh indeed—but the fact that he knew her well enough that he could pinpoint such a precise issue made her glow on the inside.

Chat room

Kuru: We have waited for quite some time, but Kanra still shows no sign of appearing.

Mai: No-show.

Kuru: What a truly obnoxious boor, showing up and wreaking havoc when not expected and never being available when one has a need to talk. The utility of the Internet is that it fosters communication between distant people. Is it possible that Kanra has grown not just physically distant but emotionally as well? What a sad state of affairs.

Mai: Sad.

Kuru: Now we must record our frustrations with the world to improve our mood. For example, why is it that the convenience store carries so many cashews and almonds but hardly ever a hint of walnuts? Particularly when mixed-nut packages have the entire trio of cashews, almonds, and walnuts!

Mai: It doesn't matter.

Mai: Eep.

Mai: That was naughty, Kuru.

Kuru: Oh, really? So merely a light pinch on the calf is enough for you to label me lascivious? I can see where your mind goes. One wonders what sort of places I could pinch that would elicit accusations of harlotry! Perhaps an experiment is in order.

Mai: Stop, stop, stop.

Sharo has entered the chat.

Sharo: Enough of that, you little sluts.

Sharo: Stop harassing each other online already.

Mai: Hello.

Kuru: Oh my, at last another person comes along, and it's the one I don't wish to see.

Sharo: Well, most humblest of humble apologies for not living up to your expectations, princess.

Sharo: Kakh! Ptu!

Kuru: Either your digital glob of spit marks you as an absolute lout or an online wizard capable of conjuring a wide and precise range of emotions... In either case, my disgust is a simple fact that cannot be avoided.

Mai: Spit is gross.

<Private Mode> Sharo: By the way, Mairu and Kururi...

<Private Mode> Kuru: Oh my, whatever is the matter, Eijirou Sharaku?

<Private Mode> Mai: What's up, Master?

<Private Mode> Sharo: You guys really do trade personalities online...

<Private Mode> Sharo: But anyway, has your brother still been AWOL after that meeting?

<Private Mode> Mai: Yes.

<Private Mode> Kuru: As a matter of fact, it had already been ages when we saw him this morning.

<Private Mode> Sharo: Ah. See, I thought he had vanished into Shinjuku...

<Private Mode> Sharo: So what was he doing in Ikebukuro today?

<Private Mode> Kuru: Who knows? We might be family, but we don't watch him all the time...

<Private Mode> Mai: He seems to be doing something with the Awakusu-kai.

<Private Mode> Sharo: I see...

<Private Mode> Sharo: Well, if you find out what he's plotting in Ikebukuro, tell me.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Very well. It pains us, as his sisters.

<Private Mode> Kuru: To think of our uncontrollable brother being set loose on the town...

<Private Mode> Kuru: On the other hand, speaking of the relationship between you and Mikage...

<Private Mode> Sharo: Not talking about that. It's not meant for this avenue anyway.

<Private Mode> Sharo: It's not up to me to say. Ask in person at tomorrow's practice.

<Private Mode> Sharo: And you oughta get some exercise, too, Kururi.

<Private Mode> Sharo: You've got better proportions than Mairu, so it'd give me something to look at.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Oh my, sexually harassing teenage girls online.

<Private Mode> Mai: Disappointed.

<Private Mode> Mai: Disappointed in my master.

<Private Mode> Sharo: C'mon, the Internet's all about being more open, right?

Kuru: How can this be? Sharo is sexually harassing me in private mode. The overwhelming shame and degradation has my brain in a heat expansion that threatens to rupture my skull from within. His words are a curse upon me... They are like claws that rip my clothes as I slumber peacefully in the virtual society that is the World Wide Web!

Mai: It's awful.

Mai: I'm going to tell on you.

Mai: To your sister.

Sharo: Stop, stop, stop! Fine, I get it! My bad! I was just kidding around, geez. Guess it's my fault for not doing a sexual harassment bit with someone who realizes when a joke is a joke. Clearly, I must be the bad guy here!

Sharo: You guys make a good pair.

Mai: We're not a pair.

Kuru: We are essentially two halves of one person. It would be rude to any proper pair to compare us to them. So although there are none present, please apologize to them.

Sharo: Why would I do that?! Then again, it's way easier to apologize when no one's there.

Saika has entered the chat.

Saika: good evening

Sharo: Eek! Saika's here?!

Saika: huh

Saika: i'm sorry, have i caused you trouble

Kuru: No, there's nothing to be concerned about here. As you'll see from the backlog, it is just Sharo acting in an embarrassing manner on his own.

Kuru: By the way, Saika, I wanted to ask you something.

Saika: what is it

Kuru: I haven't seen Setton in here for about ten days. Do you know anything about that?

Saika: no

Saika: i don't really know

Saika: probably busy

Kuru: I see. I was merely wondering, as many of the old-guard members have not been present lately.

Saika: that reminds me, is TarouTanaka doing well

Mai: Haven't seen him.

Kuru: No, I haven't seen him at all, either. I suppose his exceedingly boring name made me forget about him! It really does seem like this chat room is undergoing a generational shift. It would be a shame, when we just brought in new members to make the place livelier.

Kuru: Now it looks like the successors have simply pushed the original members out.

Mai: Let's make it fun.

Mai: I'm sleepy.

Kuru: Oh my, look at the time. How did it get so late?

Kuru: We shall have to continue this tomorrow. Drugs and lack of sleep are the skin's worst enemy.

Kuru: Speaking of which, I've heard of a group selling drugs in the city these days...

Saika: are they pharmacists

Sharo: Uh, we're not talking about door-to-door salesmen here, lol.

Kuru: ...We can explain it later. But if any of you are friends with Setton or TarouTanaka in real life, please do convince them to pop in here again!

Kuru: Online chat is only fun when you have plenty of people to bring together!

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In a Dark Place 3

“Say, what’s the connection between Mikage Sharaku and you, info dealer?”

“...”

As before, the man with the burlap sack over his head and the woman who called herself Earthworm faced each other from their respective chairs.

The woman now had a cell phone in her hand, and she was checking some kind of information on it.

The man was different, too; the sack was drenched with water, expanding and contracting with each breath.

“I asked you a question. It’s not very nice to ignore me,” Earthworm said with a little laugh. She grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the table. “Or are you too thirsty to speak?”

She chuckled to herself and held the plastic bottle over the top of the sack, then tilted it without further ado. Water gushed out, falling onto the burlap sack in a little vertical torrent. It rolled down the already-wet surface of the fabric, but the room was so dark that there wasn’t even a reflection of light, just the splattering of drops on the ground that gave away the presence of liquid.

Then she stood up, leaned in close to the sack, and licked at the flowing water. The tip of her tongue pressed against the man’s cheek through the rough surface, and she could sense the softness of flesh in the way it gave.

“That’s nasty, Earthworm,” said one of the women behind her, laughing.

But Earthworm merely cackled back and ran a finger over her own tongue. “Like I give a shit about being nasty now. Oh, I just spilled some of our precious, precious water. Will you go buy some more?”

“*How many?*” the subordinate asked suspiciously. Earthworm leaned closer to the man’s ear and *hissed in a loud stage whisper*.

“Get me some two-liter bottles...about *three dozen of them*.”

Seventy-two liters in all.

Based on what just happened, the man trapped under the sack had to know how this water would be used. But just to drive the point home, Earthworm asked him, “And what do you suppose we’re going to do with all

that?”

“...”

“Bzzt! Time’s up.”

She crossed her index fingers in an X shape, not even a second after asking the question. She then placed her hands right in front of his face so that her crossed fingers could squash and pinch his nose.

“The correct answer was we’re gonna keep pouring it on your head forever!” she announced, like a game-show host describing a prize. Then she narrowed her eyes, and without inflection, she continued, “As punishment for losing the game, we’ll make your sisters drink, too, when they get here.”

“...”

“But don’t worry, all right? It’s not going to be that bitter stuff they feed to people for laughs on TV. I’m not that mean-spirited. I wouldn’t give them something that hideous,” she assured him, waving her hand. Her face lit up. “We’re just going to feed them each *just about ten liters of delicious mineral water.*”

“...”

The man’s head rose; he had been still until that point.

“Oh, don’t worry, that wasn’t a euphemism for drowning them, okay? But given that you deal in information, you probably know there’s a lethal limit for water ingestion, right?”

“...”

“But I’m not the sciency type, so I don’t know how much you actually have to drink to die, ha-ha. Would ten liters work? What do you think?” she prodded, excitedly waiting for the water and sisters to arrive. “Whoa, wait, what? You don’t seem...that panicked yet?”

“...”

“That sucks. That really hurts. You don’t understand how important this is to me.” She was straddling her chair backward, rocking it back and forth. “Oh, wait. Say, are you assuming your sisters can’t be caught that easily?”

“.....”

She caught a minute twitch of his head and leered. “I hear the younger of the twins is the star of the Rakuei Gym girls’ division. And the older one has a bunch of toys like stun guns and sprays. Against a few ordinary men, you might actually be right in that assumption.”

“...”

“So we decided to take some steps. First of all, what do you think about

taking Kururi hostage while she's alone? You're super-super-close with your sisters, right? Like make-people-sick-just-watching-you level."

Earthworm dangled the empty plastic bottle between her thumb and ring finger and lightly bopped it against the forehead under the sack. She punctuated the punchy rhythm by asking, "*Are you wondering how I knew that?*"

"..."

"Did you think you were the only info broker who was in the know?"

She knew that silence would be his only answer at this point. No point in allowing him a chance for rebuttal.

"You see, there are others like you out there...but you don't know about them. Because unlike you, they're too good to let their names and faces get out. Like I said earlier, you're actually an amateur, aren't you? What would you call it, a semipro? Ha-ha, that's so funny!"

"..."

The man in the burlap sack shook slightly, not indicating any semblance of mirth. Earthworm ignored his reaction and pressed the bottle against his forehead.

"Now...this other info dealer... Uh, to avoid confusion, let's say this is Informant B, okay? And you're Informant A. Well, we managed to buy a whole lot of info about A from B! It was quite funny how much we learned!"

She got up from the chair, slowly walked around to the back of his, and gently rested her hands on his shoulders. Then she leaned over, pressing her chest into his shoulders, and spoke right into the back of his neck, where the burlap sack was tied just loose enough not to suffocate him.

"You're an info broker, too, right? So you've got some killer stuff to tell us, I bet."

"..."

The man writhed. Earthworm savored his reaction to the breath on his neck and did it again. "You have a job making money from things people don't want others to know, their deepest, darkest secrets. Surely you could have seen this possibility at some point?"

"..."

"Not that being prepared for the consequences excuses your actions." Earthworm snorted. She lifted her head to whisper into his ear, "Know anything about the group Heaven's Slave?"

“...!”

She sensed his back tense, and her narrowed eyes went as wide as a snake’s.

“Aha, I saw it! You do know something, don’t you...?”

“...”

“You can’t go back to holding your silence. It won’t work! Oh...unless you’re saving it? Once the darling little sisters of Izaya Orihara arrive, we can all listen together.”

She was looking at the burlap sack the way a child would look at her birthday presents all wrapped up in paper.

“So back to the topic... What’s your connection to Mikage Sharaku?”

“...”

“She’s not just a coach at the gym your sisters visit...right? Informant B told us quite a lot about that. Remember?” she said, turning to her companions around her. They merely smiled in the gloom. She took that as confirmation and turned back to him, pleased.

“When Mikage was in high school, she was one of your little groupies, wasn’t she?”

“...”

“Quite amazing that you had such a flock of followers. Are there any still involved with you to this day? Or did you make sure to settle your tabs with all of them?” She was taunting him, but something about this line of questioning gave her another thought.

“Huh...? Wait, if you were that popular, you’d be a big man around town. I hate to keep asking this, but why is it that you wanted to be an info broker when you’re so well-known already? It’s dangerous. I can’t believe you survived up to this point.”

“...”

Despite the taunts and insults, the man under the burlap sack still did not speak.

“Did you think having a yakuza sponsor meant no one would dare come after you? You thought wrong! We don’t want a fight with the senior Awakusu, to be sure, but we’re dangerous enough on our own to mess with the lower members. I think you’ve seen that for yourself.”

“...”

“Now, I’d be lying if I said I had no concerns...but we’re safe with our owner. If it comes to trouble, the owner will clear things up with the yakuza.

I'm talking about a very scary man, all right? If you think I'm bad, you can't even imagine what's coming," Earthworm said, half speaking to herself as she stared at the ceiling, then returned to her seat.

"Oh, right. This bit of info didn't come from Informant B...but I suppose it went without saying, right? You've been famous around Ikebukuro since your high school days, Izaya Orihara?"

"..."

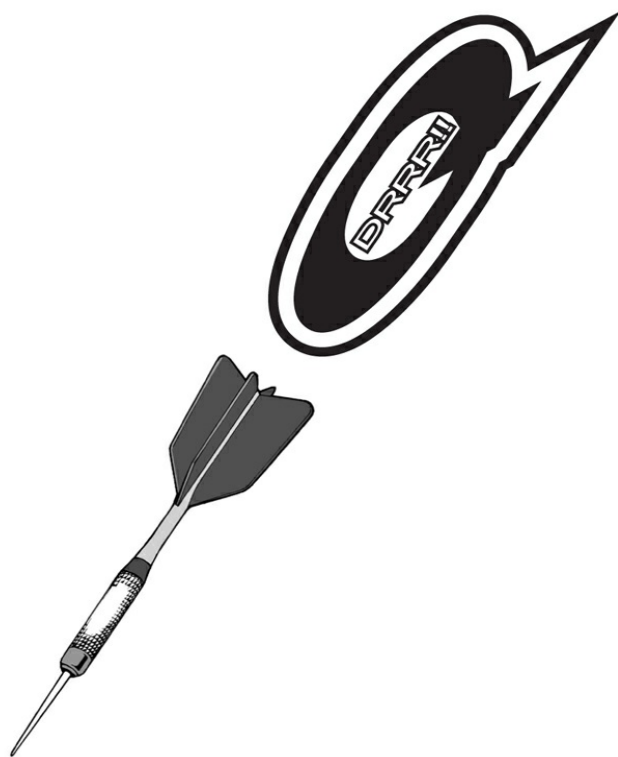
"There was some big fight, yes? I'm not familiar with the details because I don't live here."

She took out her phone to remind herself of the particulars.

"It says you fought with someone named Shizuo...Heiwajima?"

Time rewound once again.

CHAPTER 3 Fleabrain



Chapter 3: Fleabrain

Early August, night, Ikebukuro, in a park

“The...goddamn hell! Did that son of a bitch send you?!”

Along with this enraged statement, an illegally parked motorcycle was lifted high into the air.

There were no cranes or forklifts present, merely a man lifting over two hundred pounds of metal with absolute ease, using nothing other than his own muscles. Another young man fell to the ground in shock. The silhouette of the powerful man, backlit by the lights of the park, must have looked like a grim omen of death.

“N-no, wait, easy, easy, buh-buh-bud-buddy—,” the young man stammered, his teeth rattling.

Temples twitching, bike held aloft, Shizuo Heiwajima said, “What’d you say? Bloody? Don’t worry—you’re about to get bloody, all right...”

“Calm down, Shizuo. He’s honestly gonna die if you throw it at him. And that’s an expensive machine. It’s not a fair punishment for illegal parking,” said a resigned voice near the bike-wielding incarnation of death and violence.

This other man had distinctive dreadlocks, and behind him was a white woman with knockout proportions and a flat expression.

“It’s stupid for you to become a murderer just because the guy dropped his name. Isn’t that right?” he continued without much force

Despite that, Shizuo relented and lowered the motorcycle to the ground.

“...Yeah.”

His fury at the quaking youth was still there, though. He glared at his prey as if the act would allow him to clench the boy’s heart in his hands.

Tom Tanaka, the man with dreads and glasses, cut between the two and bowed to the rider quite anticlimactically. “Sorry about startling you like that.”

“Er, uh, wha—?” The sitting duck gaped, his body trembling as he

struggled to understand. He looked like an ordinary college student, except that he had three cell phones, one in his shirt pocket and two on either hip. It was pretty clear he wasn't leading a perfectly innocent life.

Tom's brow furrowed. "But you've got your own problems, man. I have no idea what you thought you were doing, but you had to have done your research before crossing him, right? How could you possibly think that saying, 'You know Izaya Orihara? You guys are good friends, huh?' was a good idea? On top of that, you never ask a question to a stranger that way, because he's gonna think you're picking a fight! Got that?!"

"S-sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm sorry! I'm really, really sorry!" the young man groveled.

Behind Tom, Shizuo was calming down, his breathing steady again. He glared at the kid.

"So...what was that about me and the fleabrain?"

"S-s-suh-suh-suhhy!"

He was so freaked out that he couldn't even pronounce the word *sorry*. Only by averting his eyes from Shizuo was he able to regain enough composure to speak with understandable clarity.

"I, uh, I am not your enemy! If—if—if anything, *we've* got a score to settle with that Izaya guy, too... And we're looking for him now!"

"What...?"

"Er, I mean, the leader of our group, it turns out that Izaya had messed with his girlfriend...s-so he's goin' crazy trying to track the guy down!"

"So, what'd you wanna ask me?"

Several minutes later, they were in a quiet spot deeper in the park for easier discussion.

"R-right, well, we've been...uh...looking for information on this Izaya Orihara asshole...but he's real hard to figure out, and we have no idea where he is..."

"Hell, I wish I knew where to find him. Then I could pulverize his skull myself..."

The Caucasian woman, Vorona, chimed in flatly, "A proposal of curiosity since ancient times exists. Is Izaya Orihara a life-form classified as a hated and fated foe of Sir Shizuo?"

"No, Izaya Orihara is a fleabrain because he's like a parasite. He sneaks up on you, and before you realize it, he sucks your blood. You gotta be

careful that he doesn't latch on to you."

"Understanding is complete. Acceptance and acknowledgment have completed simultaneously," she said, which was about the longest and strangest way anyone had ever said, "I see," and then filed the definition of *Izaya Orihara* away in their mental dictionary.

As a matter of fact, when she had been running odd jobs with her partner Slon, she'd taken on a contract from Izaya to hurt Anri Sonohara—but Vorona was so disinterested in her clients that she either forgot his name and face or never knew them to begin with.

Thus, she registered the name Izaya Orihara under the nickname "Fleabrain," not realizing her own odd connection to the man.

Meanwhile, the young man interjected, eager to please, "Y-yeah! Yeah, exactly! He's a real piece of shit, this Izaya guy! The boss is super-pissed! He wants to kill him for stealin' his girl!"

Tom promptly threw some cold water on that idea. "Listen, I get that he's mad about losing his girlfriend, but would you mind not involving us in your murder fantasies or whatever? Shizuo already loses his composure enough just by hearing the guy's name."

"...Don't worry. If I grind him into a bloody pulp, I'll make sure to do it in a way that doesn't cause trouble for you, or Vorona, or the rest of the company," Shizuo assured him, quite serious.

"You know that's not what I mean," Tom snapped. "First of all, you can't do that without 'causing trouble' for us, and like I keep telling you, there's no reason to throw your life away over a total scoundrel like him!"

"...Listen, if the fleabrain's going to kick the bucket somewhere that I can't see him, that's fine..."

To no one's benefit, Vorona chimed in, "If I carry out the assassination, there's a high confidence that the evidence will reach a negative amount. Multiple methods exist to exterminate the pest Izaya."

Shizuo met this bloodcurdling suggestion with a raised eyebrow. "C'mon, you shouldn't say stuff like that, even as a joke," he said, ignoring the fact that he himself had just mentioned murdering Izaya multiple times.

He patted Vorona on the head and said, "I appreciate the sentiment, though. Thanks."

"..."

Vorona looked up at him in silence, then averted her eyes.

Shizuo and Vorona kinda seem like they're having...a moment? Tom

thought, conflicted about the combination of friendly interaction and conversation topic. *I don't know if this qualifies as a good moment, but...I guess it is? Or am I wrong?*

Even further out of the loop was the stranger, who decided to break the growing silence by bowing to Shizuo and returning the discussion to the topic at hand.

“Um...so...um...I don't expect you know where to find him, but...if you've fought with Izaya Orihara, maybe you'd know some ticks of his, or patterns, or something like a *weakness* that we could exploit?”

“Weakness? You don't need a weakness. Just find that skinny-ass fleabrain and beat the crap out of him until he's dead. But...like a flea, I suppose he's really good at speeding away. The only one who could catch him was Shishizaki back in high school... That's right, ever since high school... Ahhh, the way that filthy flea was always jumping and hopping around...!”

Anger welled up in Shizuo's eyes as his reminiscing took him further into the past, muttering to himself.

“Um...uh-huh...,” said the young man, who sensed danger and tried to wrap up their conversation so he could withdraw.



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* * *

Then another voice split the night, one totally at odds with Shizuo's.

“Vooo-rooo-naaa! Good eveni-yaah!”

With an odd combination of greeting and combat shout, a slender figure leaped on Vorona from behind.

“...”

Vorona blocked the attacker's leg in silence and threw the person to the ground with one flowing motion. However, in the instant the attacker touched the ground, Vorona's arms were suddenly empty, the mystery figure flipping in the air to land upright.

“Tch! So much for my plan to squeeze Vorona from behind!” said Mairu, laughing.

Kururi trotted up behind her and quickly bowed to the group. “... Night...” [Good evening.]

“I considered a need to ask before exchanging evening greetings. Why did you leap upon me and attempt to grapple? It is possible I would eliminate you by force. That is danger.”

“It's just a little physical closeness! You're such a force of eroticism, I figure we ought to take inspiration from each other to up our games! And you're so strong, you know? So I want to attack you to find out which of us is tougher. I'd be fine with taking you to the ground or being taken myself. Really, I just want to touch your skin to see how smooth it is. Can I just touch it? Please?”

“It is unclear what you are saying. I request you release an explanation,” Vorona said, confused.

Rather than answer her, Mairu waved to Shizuo. “Hey, Shizuo! Hi there! Sorry, I tried to waste dear Brother Iza today and failed!”

Right at that instant, the young man's eye twitched. “Brother Eeza?”

He mulled over the meaning of this unfamiliar phrase, repeating it to himself—until a furious voice drowned out his own.

“Hey...why do you have three cell phones...?”

“Huh?”

The man turned to see Shizuo, his eyes flashing so dangerously you could actually tell through the sunglasses. He was so menacing that he could've been ready to attack at any moment.

“A guy walking around with three or four phones makes me think about

that fleabrain... You aren't getting up to some shady shit like him, are you? Actually, don't answer that; I can just crush you to a pulp anyway..."

"W-wait, hang on..."

"If you don't want that to happen, then disappear in the next three seconds...got that...?"

Just before Shizuo could start with *one*, the kid turned on his heel and sped out of the park like a rabbit.

The twins and Vorona looked extremely nonplussed. Tom, however, got the picture. He patted Shizuo kindly on the shoulder.

"See? That was nice. Sure, he probably thinks you're crazy for snapping at him over having three phones, but at least he'll keep a safe distance from you in the future."

"...That's not what I was doing. I honestly did get mad because it reminded me of that fleabrain," Shizuo replied. He turned to Kururi and Mairu and warned them, "Don't wander around the town for a while. Best not to advertise that you're the fleabrain's family."

"Huh? Why not?"

"...Mystery..." [Why do you say that?]

Shizuo gritted his teeth in annoyance. "It seems like that moronic fleabrain is *up to something* again."

Then he paused, unsure of whether to continue or not. He clucked his tongue. "Look, I don't wanna say this to you, but if push comes to shove, he'd happily abandon you two to save his own skin, in my opinion. Sorry if you disagree with me there. But I'm worried about you. You need to be able to protect yourselves."

For a moment, he worried that he was stepping outside of his comfort zone with that statement. The next moment, Kururi and Mairu each grabbed an arm.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he demanded.

Mairu cackled, and Kururi merely smiled. "So, you're secretly really nice, huh, Shizuo?"

"...Respect..." [It's wonderful.]

"I knew it! So is Yuuhei's kindness actually something he got from you?"

"Knock it off! Don't compare me to Kasuka. It's not fair to him!" Shizuo snapped, both arms still held tight by the teenage girls.

"Requesting proximity from Sir Shizuo. Arm-related bonds diminish

efficacy of work. It is impossible to understand why you undertake these actions,” said Vorona, trying to separate the girls from Shizuo.

Tom watched the humorous scene with a shake of his head and scratch of his cheek. “Things sure are lively over here.

“...Let’s just hope that nothing ends up happening.”



At that moment, Ikebukuro, building rooftop

“Nice to see you again, courier.”

Under a faded black sky, where the neon lights of the city erased any trace of the stars, Celty was shrouded in a darkness so deep that even the bright lights could not penetrate it. Standing opposite her and waving was Izaya.

“How’s Shinra doing? He was getting treatment with Nebula’s latest equipment, so I figure he’ll recover faster than if you’d taken him to Raira General Hospital. Or...depending on how the home recuperation is going, I guess that could be worse.”

“...Where did you hear all that?”

“Hey, I have my own information network. Feel free to imagine that I have spies within Nebula, if that will help you—but I doubt it will do you much good. I mean, just finding a spy isn’t going to change anything.”

It was the exact same Izaya whom Celty had always seen when he hired her to run jobs for him. And it was this fact that made her so annoyed.

Shinra claimed this man for a friend. And even though Shinra had been terribly hurt, and Izaya knew all about it, he was acting the same way he always did.

“If you were behind that attack on Shinra, then I think it’s quite useful to find your spies,” she wrote, channeling that frustration and suspicion. She showed the message to Izaya, but it had no effect on his attitude.

“Ooh, very scary. What did I tell you? I didn’t plot the attack on Shinra. I can’t imagine what benefit that would hold for me.”

“You seem like you would do anything because it ‘seemed fun.’”

“That is quite cruel. Do I really seem like such a hedonistic thrill seeker?

I'm not as omnipotent or liberated as I would need to be to do any little thing that seems fun. Being a monster, you might find this hard to understand, but human beings live within many varied strictures. Total freedom is a luxury afforded only to those who are prepared to ride headlong to their miserable deaths. And I don't want to die yet—simple as that,” he said, all glib pomposity.

This only amplified Celty's irritation, which she poured into her PDA.

“...So Shinra got terribly injured, and you don't feel a thing?”

“When I got stabbed and told Shinra about it, he said, ‘So long,’ and hung up the call. If I seem distant, it's only because I'm matching his level of concern.”

“Damn... We were still worried about you...after that! Instead, you called the cops and set up traps, and... Besides, if you don't like something being done to you, then don't do it to others! And...and you got stabbed because you deserved it!”

“And Shinra didn't?” he shot back.

Celty stood her ground. *“I'm here to find out whether that's true or not. You said you had information on the culprit? If you tell me you were lying, I really will truss you up and toss you to Shizuo.”*

“I'll lie to others and even to myself, but not when it comes to business. I wouldn't have much of a business if I did that. You can think of lying as a kind of side hobby of mine.”

“Many people turn their hobbies into a job.”

“Good comeback. But let's just get down to business, shall we?”

He straightened up from leaning against the rooftop fence and made his way toward Celty. But she trained her attention on the surroundings and warned, *“Hang on.”*

“What is it?”

“...Who are the people around us?”

She was speaking about the men elsewhere on the roof, lurking in the shadows of the building's water tank, loitering against the walls, watching them. The sight of the bone-patterned jackets they were wearing jogged something in Celty's memory.

“Hey, aren't they from Dragon Zombie?”

Izaya clapped his hands. “Yes, brilliant! I'm surprised you remember them; they haven't been riding for a while.”

Dragon Zombie was the name of a motorcycle gang that roamed far and

wide through every corner of Tokyo. They often jostled with Jan-Jaka-Jan, the group that had Awakusu-kai backing, until they'd simply vanished from the streets not long ago.

Jan-Jaka-Jan had gone into hiding around the same time, which led Celty to suspect they were just laying low out of fear of that ferocious traffic cop. But the last thing she expected was to see them here on a rooftop, with nary a bike in sight.

"What are they doing here?"

He really is the mastermind behind Shinra's attack after all, isn't he? And now he's brought some goons around to take care of me next...?

Her shadows writhed in alarm. If need be, Celty would plunge the entire rooftop into shadow.

Izaya waved a hand in benign denial. "Oh, don't worry; you're fine. No need for paranoia. These guys are both my transportation and my bodyguards, in a way."

"Bodyguards...?"

"I got stabbed, didn't I? I haven't found the guy who stabbed me yet, but you know how people take things out on me, right? So I have no choice but to pay for personal protection. You know how they're cracking down on bikers lately, don't you?"

"I'll admit you're right about that," Celty typed, shivering as she recalled her white-knuckle chase with Kinnosuke Kuzuhara yesterday. *"But don't act like you're so innocent and people just have it out for you."*

"I was kidding. Even I understand that my actions and personality have rightfully earned me some enmity."

"Have you considered trying to change your personality for the better?"

"If I feel like it," Izaya said without interest.

Celty wasn't particularly dedicated to correcting his ways, either. *"Fine, I won't pay attention to them. What do you need me to ferry?"*

"Hang on, let's do this in order. This will actually be a multiday job."

"Not so fast. I have to take care of Shinra at home! I can't just leave for several days!" she protested, but he shook his head like it was no problem.

"It's fine. I'm not going to tie you down the whole time. It'll last several days, but I only need a bit of time each day."

"A bit at a time?"

"It's simple. I just want you to be my assistant. There are some items of information I need to ascertain, and I need someone who can act freely, who

isn't tied down by their position or affiliation."

"So ask your little Dragon Zombie friends."

He wasn't moved by this suggestion. "I need them to focus solely on my personal defense. My life is rather precious to me."

"Then why are you asking a courier to do information gathering for you? That's outside my line of business...", she protested, but even Celty knew she had no choice but to accept.

She needed the information he promised to pay her—the culprit of Shinra's attack—and she would just have to do what he asked of her. She could tie Izaya up with her shadows and threaten him, but she knew he wouldn't give up his info, being blessed with an abnormal amount of willpower in that regard. She could only negotiate halfheartedly.

"I'll give you my best if I accept, but you'd better not renege on your end of the deal by claiming it wasn't up to your expectations."

"I understand. You'll have the information you want, so long as you don't completely betray me or shirk your duties. Besides, what I want you to do really isn't very far from your ordinary courier work. In a sense, I would want a courier to do it."

"What do you mean?" she asked, annoyed at the vagueness.

Izaya grinned like some mischievous scamp, patted Celty on the shoulder, then hopped up on top of the rooftop fence and sat on it.

Once she might have been horrified at the possibility that he could fall, but Celty chose not to coax him down. She simply waited for him to speak.

He looked down at her from his vantage point and clapped his hands.

"You see, the item I want you to ferry for me..."

"...is information."



One hour later, Tokyo, nightclub

It was your stereotypical nightclub, the kind you'd see in any Hollywood movie with a nightlife scene. The dark dance hall pulsed with sensual music, and an array of dazzling colored lights tore through the gloom. Up on the third floor, isolated from the pounding music and lights, was a private room

—where a number of college students who seemed totally out of place were lounging.

The walls were a shade of blue that brought the city's night sky to mind. In the middle was a white marble table, surrounded by soft black leather couches. The interior screamed VIP.

"Nice space, huh?" said a man, a dart in his hand.

On the wall was a well-used dartboard and not the digital kind. It provided the room with a kind of analog, old-fashioned class.

"Until the end of last year, the second floor of this place was a hangout spot for *people in our business*. Apparently, it got shut down around that point because the Awakusu-kai and the cops got wind of it."

"Uh, doesn't that make this a bad place to hang out?"

"No, look on the other side. They already took all the bad luck with them. Besides, my dad *owns* this club, so I can do what I want here. I told him I need a study room, and he said I can use it whenever I want, as long as no one's reserved it."

The young man, who looked like the sort of honor student who would never waste his time at a nightclub, hurled the dart at its board.

It stuck with a crisp *thock*, the only sound in the room for several seconds.

The bull's-eye prompted no reaction from the young man. Perhaps he played some kind of sport, for despite his studious look, he was not wispy but actually somewhat muscular. He was the classic rich kid blessed with strength, looks, and attitude—the perfect owner for the picturesque room.

The silence was broken at last by the very young man who threw the dart.

"...And did Shizuo Heiwajima actually believe that *made-up story* about my girlfriend being toyed with?"

Another young man standing near the door—the very same one who had spoken to Shizuo in the park—put on an ingratiating simper and scratched the back of his head.

"Oh yeah, he bought it. He was every bit the monster that people say he is, but I guess he ain't the sharpest tool in the shed! Plus, I did actually bring back some information about that Izaya Orihara guy! And honestly, while he might be an info broker, I don't think he's worth worrying yourself over, Mr. Shijima."

"It was about the girl who appeared to be his sister...right?"

"That's right! The kid with the glasses said 'Brother Iza,' loud and clear!

And the other girl with her looked pretty similar, so maybe they're all siblings."

"Ahh, interesting. Sisters. That could certainly be fodder for a deal," said the man named Shijima. He took a fresh dart and assumed the tossing position. "So where does she live?"

"Huh?"

The low-level member froze. It was a perfectly natural follow-up question, yet he had no answers to give to his boss.

"If those girls are not here now, then it must be because you trailed them and discovered where they live, at least. Correct?"

"Uh, well...this Shizuo guy was about ready to rage, so I kinda had to just bug outta there..."

"I see. That's too bad. Well, I guess we can look into that tomorrow," Shijima said, smiling. The other young man chuckled a bit to hide his shame.

Then Shijima looked closer at the other fellow and said, "Hmm...? Is there something stuck on your eyes?"

"What?"

"There's a mark or something, right around your eyelids. Close your eyes for a second."

"Uh, yes, sir."

Obediently, he closed his eyes.

Less than a second later, something struck *his nose*.

"Dzuh?! Ah...aaagh!"

He opened his eyes, taken aback. Right in the middle of his viewpoint, stuck between the right and left eyes, was the blurred outline of two sticks. Actually, it was just the one but so close that he couldn't focus it into a single image.

His initial impression was that he'd been attacked by some tiny lizard or perhaps a bee. He swung his hand at his nose to brush it away. But the instant he swiped the object sideways, gouging pain exploded in the middle of his face.

"Yiaah!"

Whatever it was that stuck in his nose fell out with the impact. The young man held his bleeding nose and looked down at the object on the ground.

“Wha...?”

Is that...a...dart...?

Understanding arrived at the same moment as a dark, looming figure.

“Sh...Shi...Shiji...ma? Aaaah! Nnnng!”

Suddenly, Shijima, who’d been standing in the center of the room, was now right in front of him, jabbing a dart into the youth’s shoulder. The pain in both wounds resonated with each other, churning the insides of his brain. Pain throttled his body, preventing any kind of understanding from taking root.

“Wh-what?! What d-did! I—?!” he stammered, clutching his shoulder and backing away to huddle against the wall in the corner of the room. The reaction of the others was mixed, from fraught apprehension to cackling laughter.

“Are you trying to say, ‘What did I do?’” Shijima suggested, then answered the question himself. *“It was what you didn’t do, obviously.”*

He leaned down to pick up the dart on the floor, then promptly hurled it at the cowering man in the corner.

“Hyeeaaugh?!” he shrieked, terror segueing into pain.

Shijima strode over, lifted his foot high, then drove it down hard, directly onto the dart sticking out of the man’s thigh.

“Gaaaah!! Rghrlrrzlkggg!”

The guttural shriek filled the room. But just as the soundproof walls prevented the music from the dance club from getting in there, so, too, did they keep his screams from getting out.

Tears were streaming down his face, racked with confusion and terror, while agony gripped his spine. Shijima smiled benignly down at him, still pressing on the dart with his foot, and said, “Shizuo Heiwajima, not the sharpest tool in the shed...? Are you sure you’re not thinking of yourself? I haven’t got a second to waste here. Not a second to waste. Not—a—sec—ond—to—waste!”

With each syllable, he pressed his weight down through his foot, eliciting moans from his victim like some kind of depraved, broken wind instrument.

“You ought to be thanking me. If I hadn’t warned you to close your eyes, you might’ve tried to dodge and ended up losing some of your eyesight.”

At last, Shijima removed his foot and turned away from the agonized man. The rich boy was done with his failure of a follower now and spoke to the rest of his flunkies instead.

“I can’t have you treating this like some kind of informal college club... Actually, I don’t mind that. But I’m not the problem here. The problem is that *I’m the one who takes the brunt of Kumoi’s anger.*”

Kumoi.

The name turned the room to ice.

Even when the dart of punishment had stuck in the young man’s nose, it hadn’t been this silent. But the sound of the name Kumoi hitting their eardrums quieted even the laughter of those who had enjoyed seeing all the blood.

The sound of the hapless youth groaning in the corner might have still been there, but the information didn’t reach their brains—such was the focus inspired by the name Kumoi.

“H-hey, Shijima, did you hear from Kumoi recently?” asked one of his friends, sitting on the leather sofa.

“Obviously,” Shijima said, his pleasant smile back. “After all, not only did we *fail to get rid of* the Awakusu-kai’s Akabayashi, we also *fought some totally unrelated mobsters* and made it into the paper. Take a guess...do you think Kumoi’s *just going to let something like that slide?*”

Although the benign expression never left Shijima’s face, a single drop of sweat ran down his cheek.

“We’ve brought shame upon Heaven’s Slave,” he said, undoing the shirt button on his right cuff. He tugged the sleeve up to his elbow.

“...”

The entire room was silent again. Some averted their eyes from the sight, while others looked closer, unable to believe what they were seeing.

There was a very long, strange red mark on his right arm.

From just below the wrist up to his shoulder ran a series of long parallel lines.

Almost like musical notation, thought one of the men, then realized, *No, not almost.*

It was musical notation, the five-line staff to hang notes upon.

Sure enough, here and there on the lines was an ugly red dot, some of which even contained the fine stem that marked them as eighth notes.

“Th-those cuts... How? Why?”

“Hmm? Oh, Kumoi made them himself.”

“With...a knife?”

The man probably had to ask, lest he be consumed by the surrealism of

the scene. The word *knife* had popped up as his rational mind tried to latch on to something that would make sense of it all.

That's right. It must be a knife wound. Yeah, like the kind of thing stupid punks do now and then. A sort of dare, like stubbing out a cigarette on your arm.

Yeah. Nothing else to it. I've seen worse on TV shows and in manga. And it beats getting your pinkie finger chopped down to size, right?

Rationalizations came and went through his mind. But the fresh wounds staring him in the face spoke much more eloquently of pain than his imagination could.

Better than actually losing an arm or a finger? Perhaps, but these were not just scratches. They were deep enough to reach muscle.

Even then, their brains worked hard to rationalize this, their imaginations telling them that “this punishment wasn’t that bad.”

Shijima simply shook his head, cutting off the blissful escape route of ignorance.

“This might be healing faster if that was the case,” he said and approached the dartboard with an easy nonchalance that no one else in the room shared at that moment. He pulled out three of the darts stuck there and rolled them around in his palm.

“He gouged out each line, one by one, with these darts.”

“...”

Both chills and sweat ran down their backs.

An act of composition, performed through the destruction of flesh, with a tool not designed for cutting. Just the thought of this brought a cold, hard lump to their bellies.

“Oh, but it was still way better than the time he drilled my teeth without anesthesia. Although, he did say I had to scream to the tune that he was carving on me. I tell you, Kumoi’s got a brilliant sense of humor,” Shijima said, laughing.

No one replied. The man named Kumoi was apparently their leader, but nearly all the punishment he meted out for failure fell upon his right-hand man, Shijima.

“You know what he said? We’re the shadow of the Dollars,” Shijima said, his words the only heat in the frozen scene. He turned to the dartboard again. “He said we’re fine being second place. All we have to be is a little shadow, hiding behind the mass of the Dollars... We just lack the next bit of

strength we need to solidify ourselves for good.”

Thock. A dart landed cleanly on the bull’s-eye again.

“We steal Amphisbaena’s system entirely for Heaven’s Slave’s use.”

Thock. Another one struck the target. His eyes narrowed fanatically.

“That’s what Kumoi wants.”

Thock. The final dart hit home.

Shijima’s words were the only sound in the room after that. The sound of despair.

If only he didn’t look so incredibly happy as he said them.

“We no longer have an out.”

Chat room

.
. .

The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.

Saika has entered the chat.

Saika: good evening

Saika: it's nice to be here

CallowCadet has entered the chat.

CallowCadet: Greetings, my name is CallowCadet!

CallowCadet: Erm, this is my debut in this chat room.

CallowCadet: I found out about this place from Setton! It's nice to meet you all!

Saika: nice to meet you

Saika: my name is saika

Saika: it's a pleasure

Saika: so are you a friend of setton's

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: It's me, Anri.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: I just remembered that Celty invited me here.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: There's been some stuff recently, and now all I can do is stare at my computer.

CallowCadet: Yeah, that about sums it up! I'm glad to be here!

<Private Mode> Saika: are you dr. kishitani

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Correct! I don't suppose there's anyone else Celty would invite anyway.

<Private Mode> Saika: are you feeling all right

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Oh, right. You heard from Celty, didn't you?

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Well, at least I'm able to type on the computer.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: With a special desk that points to me, lying faceup on the bed.

<Private Mode> Saika: please take care

<Private Mode> Saika: i'll pray for your recovery

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Thank you, I will take care. Don't worry too much.

<Private Mode> Saika: thank you for your consideration

<Private Mode> Saika: so you learned how to use private mode right away

<Private Mode> Saika: that's amazing

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: It's not too hard to go by feel, being familiar with

computers already.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: I would've liked to say hello to others, too, but you're the only one here now, I take it?

<Private Mode> Saika: i'm sorry

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: You don't need to apologize for anything, Anri... I mean, Saika.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: By the way, are you typing on a phone? That must be hard.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: By which I mean, you've been in lowercase the whole time.

<Private Mode> Saika: i'm sorry

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: I just told you not to apologize, lol.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: If I make you say sorry a million times, Celty will really let me hear it later.

<Private Mode> Saika: how is celty

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Oh, she's doing fine! She's still out and about, though.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: You know, when it comes to computer auto-correction and conversion and all of that,

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Why not ask Mikado for help?

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: I'm sure he knows all about that sort of thing.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: In fact, I don't think anyone would complain if you invited him here to this chat.

<Private Mode> Saika: i'm sorry

<Private Mode> Saika: i've thought about that too

<Private Mode> Saika: but i don't want ryuugamine to see the name saika

<Private Mode> Saika: i'm not ready for that yet

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Ah, I see. Well, I understand that feeling.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Mikado would be able to intuit that Saika was involved with the cursed blade incident.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: So it would be awkward for him to realize you're using its name.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Well, you can take it at your own pace.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Unlike me, both you and Mikado are on the shy side.

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: But as far as your status as the cursed sword, and how you choose to live...

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Or even how you wish to reveal the truth to Mikado...

<Private Mode> CallowCadet: I'm certainly here and willing to talk anytime you want.

<Private Mode> Saika: thank you

<Private Mode> Saika: that's very kind of you

<Private Mode> Saika: you and celty are the only ones i can talk to about saika

<Private Mode> Saika: so i appreciate you being there

<Private Mode> Saika: but isn't it a bother to you
<Private Mode> Saika: isn't my presence going to cause trouble for you two
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Don't let it bother you, I said!
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Listen, I'm only saying this because we're in Private Mode...
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: The truth is, Celty thinks of you like a very close friend.
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: And Celty's friends are my friends.
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: So I'll hear you out—assuming I have the time.
<Private Mode> Saika: that's great
<Private Mode> Saika: that makes me very happy
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Wow, you're making me feel kind of self-conscious, lol.
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Well, let's consider this a brief parting of the ways.
<Private Mode> CallowCadet: Now removing Private Mode!

CallowCadet: I suppose I shall return and make a proper entrance when more people are here!
CallowCadet: Thank you for being the first to welcome me here, Saika!
Saika: thank you
Saika: see you later
CallowCadet: And you! So long...

CallowCadet has left the chat.

Saika: see you later
Saika: i will log out for now too
Saika: thank you
Saika: i hope to speak with everyone present too
Saika: i'll do my best
Saika: good-bye

Saika has left the chat.

The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.

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In a Dark Place 4

“And now, I’ll be making a *proper introduction* of Izaya Orihara for you all. *Clap, clap, clap!*” she said. The others around her dutifully performed the actual clapping.

The darkened room was now soft and gloomy, lit by the wan light of candles. There was a little Mont Blanc dessert on the table, uncharacteristically stuffed with over twenty small candles. It was essentially like one giant candle in all, sending waves of flickering light around the room.

“Izaya Orihara’s birthday is May fourth! That’s so neat! That means he’s assigned to one of the front seat numbers in the class! He’s so grown up! Wow!”

“...”

“Did you know that Izaya Orihara is twenty-five years old? But he tells people he’s only twenty-one. Why is that? Is it really so scary that you’ll be turning thirty in just a few years?” she mocked, but the man under the burlap sack just shook his head, not taking the bait.

“This is incredible. Silence for two hours now. The truth is, I’d be happy to punch you, and kick you, and stab you, and gouge you, and yank things out of you to make you scream, but that’s really no fun, is it? We’ve got to save all that for when your precious little sisters arrive! Am I right?” Earthworm seemed satisfied with herself.

She lifted the plate with the cake on it and brought it up toward the sack. “Even through the burlap, you can see the light of the candles, right?”

“...”

His breathing got louder, and he arched his back, trying to keep his distance. The bundles of candles moved even closer, sticking out of their cake pedestal.

“Look, I’m sorry about getting the fabric all wet earlier, okay? That was mean of me. So I want to dry it off for you.”

Even through the dampness, he would likely feel heat. But the man’s reaction left no clues as to his emotional state. What was under the bag—fear, despair, or boundless rage? The anticipation and endless possibilities percolated under Earthworm’s own placid exterior.

She could remove the sack at any moment. But now was not the time. To her, suppressing her raging desire to find out was its own form of bliss.

Earthworm's hobby was imagining the debasement of others. The moment of wondering what expression her desperate prey was wearing—and her hunger to see it—was the only moment that she ever felt truly alive.

I kind of want to burn his hand a little bit.

No. Shouldn't do that. Gotta wait for his sisters first...

She had to suppress that deep-down desire for torture and cover it up with her easy smile. That was the only way to maintain composure.

She wanted to push the flame even closer and see it burn the fabric.

She wanted those perfect features from the photograph to burn and twist in anguish.

And once he was so tormented that he could no longer move, she wanted to lick the wounds.

Earthworm imagined the taste of his blood on her tongue and the sound of Izaya Orihara's screams.

Imagining these sensations allowed her to feel happy to be alive. She'd done this over and over—to the enemies of Amphisbaena, to the enemies of her and the owner. Over and over, all kinds of people, all the time.

As soon as they lost consciousness, or screamed and rolled around, and she took the sack off to see, the woman would lose interest. Based on the photos, Izaya Orihara's physical appearance was right up Earthworm's alley. So she was determined to be very, very careful in choosing her moment with him.

She would indulge in waves of pleasure when the moment arrived, and she saw the perfect expression of despair on his face, and then she would lose all interest in imagining Izaya Orihara.

Meanwhile, she returned the cake to the table.

"As a matter of fact, this cake isn't for you. It's *my* birthday this month. Sorry, you can't have any."

She looked down at her phone and read off more of Izaya Orihara's personal information. "Five foot nine, one hundred twenty-eight pounds.

Pretty good physique, man. I might've preferred you a bit taller, though."

"..."

The man under the burlap sack inclined his head weakly, eliciting a chuckle from his captor.

"You're wondering how I knew your weight? Well, I do. Remember when I said my info source was good?"

"..."

She imagined the expression he must have been wearing and explained, "But these numbers are from over half a year ago, so they might be different now. You took out life insurance yesterday, didn't you, Izaya Orihara? And you had to enter your height and weight, didn't you? The info agent I deal with can even access that level of data. Isn't that amazing?"

"....."

He inhaled briefly, as though ready to speak, but ultimately did not. Instead, his shoulders rose and fell. Earthworm felt an itch deep in her stomach and returned to the phone.

"You've got seven family members listed, including yourself. Your paternal grandfather's name is Torakichi, while his wife's name is Natsu. Your maternal grandparents are both gone. Have you been performing your memorials for them? All your prayers?"

"..."

The slightest of movements from the sack could have been either a nod or a shake of the head. He probably wasn't thinking about it at all. But based on his reactions, it was clear that he could hear her voice.

She continued, "Your father is Shirou, and your mother is Kyouko... And then there are your two sisters, who are en route as we speak."

"..."

"Raijin Elementary School, Raijin Middle School, Raijin High School, then Raira College. That's an elevator school—very nice. Then again, Raira's not so special, is it? Rai-Rai-Rai-Rai. Everything Rai. Catcher in the Rai," she gibed, a little private joke, then got to her feet.

She moved her chair next to her human pet and sat down directly to his right. She then placed her index finger on his right thigh and traced a little circle there. The man's breathing went ragged as he resisted the tickling sensation.

"So...I hear that you were quite the honor student at Raijin Elementary."

"..."

“When you were in high school, you were fighting with this Heiwajima person all the time, as I understand. But the worst was in middle school, wasn’t it?”

“...”

This time the sack was completely still and silent.

“What’s wrong? Not feeling lively anymore?”

She reached over to the table for the cake again and attempted to place the plate on top of the burlap sack on his head. It took several seconds due to the rough texture of the sack, but ultimately, she succeeded in getting the dish to balance.

“...”

“Don’t let it fall, okay? Hold in those sneezes! If it falls down, it’ll burn your clothes. Oh, but don’t worry, we’ve got plenty more water to dump on you if that happens.”

The man’s head went absolutely still, which allowed Earthworm time to delve into her imagination. The sweet scent of the cake, the pristine features of the face beneath the sack, the likely humiliation—perhaps terror—splayed across them.

The shiver of anticipation and delight and the sight of the flickering candle flame put her into a brief state of self-hypnosis. Shortly thereafter, she said, “Ready for me to continue?”

“...”

“I hear you were the vice chairman of the children’s council at elementary school? You were quite the little hero during the school athletic day and a frequent recipient of awards for studying, poetry, and slogans. It also mentions some stuff about essay contests. I sure would like to read some of your childhood essays. Can you imagine that? Me reciting them aloud here.”

She cackled, then added, “But this is the strange part. How does such a model student end up as a total problem child by high school...or should I say, a model student to outward appearances, who was involved in so much foul play behind the scenes? I hear there was quite a lot of very nasty trouble that befell Raijin High for the three exact years that Izaya Orihara was there.”

“...”

“But hardly anyone actually suspected you of anything. There might have been teachers who sensed the truth, but you never got suspended or expelled for anything.”

She bobbed her head, impressed, then got up again and walked around her victim. In a wheedling voice, she asked, “So why did Izaya Orihara turn out to be such a bad boy?”

“...”

“Even our partner, Info Dealer B, hasn’t figured that one out. Which makes sense—if you knew that, you wouldn’t be an info dealer; you’d be a psychic. I was wondering why our owner became evil enough to create Amphisbaena, so I asked him...and he didn’t know, either.”

She nodded, spread her hands, and looked up at the ceiling. It was a flickering sea of red, reflecting the light of the candles.

“But I do happen to know the period that you turned bad, in fact.”

She slowed down, swimming in the soft light, and said, “Shinra Kishitani.”

It seemed as though the flickering of the candlelight wobbled briefly. Earthworm continued staring at the ceiling rather than at the man next to her.

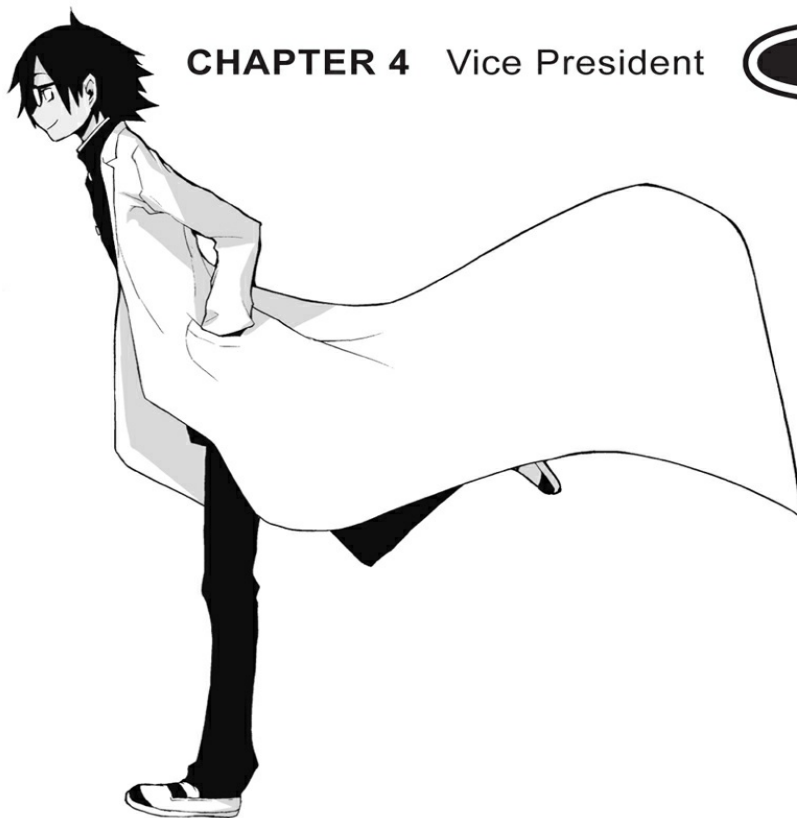
“I believe he was a classmate of yours in middle school, yes?”

“...”

“I still don’t know *why* it happened that way...

“...but it turns out you stabbed that Shinra Kishitani boy with a knife and got taken to the police as a young teen?”

Time rewound again.



CHAPTER 4 Vice President



Chapter 4: Vice President

Night, Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

"By the way...I noticed this wound hasn't disappeared yet."

Celty had changed Shinra's bandages and was wiping him down with a wet towel. She looked over his torso, which lay uncovered.

She hadn't noticed yesterday, due to the distraction of his fresh wounds, but upon closer examination, she spotted the mark from a stab wound of some kind in Shinra's side.

"Oh! It's kind of embarrassing to have you staring at an old wound of mine, but at the same time, it's rather thrilling! Oh my, what should I do?! Tell me, Celty—what should I do?!"

"*Sit still,*" her PDA said, and she continued the task of changing his bandages and wiping off his sweat.

She had ended up accepting Izaya's job and was now back home on standby until she got the call from him. When Shinra heard the facts, he'd said, "He's got to be plotting something," and then added a whole series of statements along the lines of "Just be careful, okay?"

Of course, Celty knew it was an obviously suspicious offer, too, but she couldn't decline. So here she was, trying to focus on caring for Shinra, while something unsettling nagged at the back of her mind...

And then she spotted Shinra's old scar.

Once she had changed his bandages and put freshly laundered pajamas on him, Celty brought it up again.

"Gosh, it's been forever. Ten years, is it?"

"Yeah, that long. And yet it feels like it was just yesterday. At this rate, I could blow past the median life expectancy and die of old age just around the corner."

"That's nonsense. You're not even at half the life expectancy value yet. So...I guess those scars really do last..."

As an inhuman being—a dullahan—Celty was humanlike but held

several differences. She was very tough to kill by nature, and any knife or scalpel cuts would heal in fairly short order with no sign that there had ever been a wound.

So the sight of this ancient gash on Shinra's side felt like a reminder of the distance between them. It stuck with her and made her feel oddly *unsettled*.

"I suppose I'll have this for the rest of my life," he said, sensing that Celty was bothered, and slapped at his side in a show that scars weren't a big deal.

"Oofh," he grunted, immediately doubling up in pain at the impact.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just having you at my side feels like it's helping heal me."

"I just wish it would heal that old scar, too," she typed, intending to downplay his consideration with a little joke. But then a thought occurred to her, and she asked, *"But what did you do to leave such a permanent mark? You said you got dragged into a fight in class or something."*

"Yes, I got carved up a bit with a knife."

"A knife?!" she wrote back, stunned at his nonchalance. *"Getting stabbed by a knife is no laughing matter! You said it was a fight, so I was imagining that you got pushed and fell down some stairs or something!"*

"Well, that was when there was still a wall between us."

It was actually just a year and several months ago that Celty and Shinra began a mutually loving relationship. But in the sense of them living together, they'd been acquainted for over twenty years.

At the time, the only thing this meant to Celty was that the alien "human" man she lived with had a son who'd gotten hurt. She registered this fact and felt sorry for the juvenile but thought there was no need to dig any deeper than that. In fact, she sensed that she shouldn't.

"But I loved you, wall and all!"

"Listen, that's very sweet of you to say, but that's not my point. Since when do middle schoolers have fights involving knives?!"

"Oh...right. Yeah, when I got this injury, we still hadn't really talked yet."

"Actually...I guess you're right."

It really is odd, when you think about it. From a young age, Shinra always sought me out and told me all kinds of things. That didn't change

when he got hurt, but for whatever reason, he never told me about why he got hurt.

She felt like she was about to see a new side of Shinra and wasn't entirely sure if she really wanted to ask or not.

"But you see, I have my own conflicting thoughts about this scar... I'm sorry, Celty," he said, averting his eyes in embarrassment.

She looked at him, lying faceup on the bed, and decided not to ask.

Yeah. I'm curious, but not enough that I want to place more burden on him. Everyone has a thing or two they don't want to reveal to anyone...

And then, contrary to what she'd just at last decided, Shinra began to speak.

"It all began right around the time I began middle school, I think..."

"Wait, so you're going to tell me after all?!"



Twelve years ago, Raijin Middle School, Class 1-3

"Hey, you wanna join the biology club? I mean, you wanna create it with me?" asked a boy with glasses.

"Sorry, not interested," replied a different boy.

These were the first words exchanged by Shinra Kishitani and Izaya Orihara.

The school's entrance ceremony was over, and they were sitting in their homeroom after the whole class ran through their personal introductions. The children re-formed in little groups of friends from elementary school, hopes and worries about the new stage of school mingling in the air. Only Shinra and Izaya seemed out of place from the rest.

There were several former Raijin Elementary students in the class, but none of them approached Izaya Orihara to talk. He wasn't upset by this; if anything, it seemed natural.

Izaya was an honor student, but only in the sense of his grades—he was not a *model* student in the least. He was genteel on the surface and popular with the girls, but he interacted with school in a way that was passive and removed.

One of his elementary school classmates would later say of him, “He was kind of like an alien. But he was a good guy.” Many others held similar opinions, and perhaps the most “honor student” aspect of him was the way that everyone would always caution, “He was a good guy, but...”

So he wasn’t hated by others, but neither was he particularly liked.

During lunch break, when the other students would sit in the classroom chatting or play kickball out on the field, Izaya would always be in the school library. It was almost as though he was intentionally isolating himself.

When the students would split up into teams for the yearly field trip, Izaya was always the last one out. When the others realized this, there would be a competition to recruit him. (“What, you’re not in a group?! Come with us!” “No way, we’ve got room!”) That was Izaya Orihara’s odd existence in elementary school.

Izaya himself preferred to be one step away from the crowd. He understood that he was considered an honor student. But he never mocked the people around him or looked down on them.

Really, he enjoyed the gathering place that was school.

The other students in his vicinity chatted happily, fought one another, conferred in secret about whom to bully, cried when they were the targets of that harassment—all of which was enjoyable for him to watch.

And the more he got involved, the less he was able to see.

If you considered two groups of people, one of which liked sitting in the back row of a movie theater to take in the entire crowd along with the film and the other preferring to be in the very front row for the maximum possible size of image regardless of quality, elementary school Izaya was undoubtedly among the former.

So his isolated status was, if anything, preferable to him. He’d been observing the students in the new class coalescing into various social groups with pleasure—when an innocent young boy with glasses interrupted this activity.

It was the one who had introduced himself as Shinra Kishitani during class. Izaya recalled that he’d described himself in a surprisingly dark way: “Mom got sick of Dad and divorced him, so now it’s just the three of us, including Dad.”

If there are three after his mom left, that must mean he has a sibling, Izaya realized and tried to return to his observation.

“It’s okay if you’re not interested. Let’s just make a biology club.”

“...”

Izaya instantly disliked this boy, who refused to take no for an answer. Then when he realized how rare it was for him to feel that way about another person, Izaya suddenly found his interest in this Shinra Kishitani.

“Kishitani, right?”

“Call me Shinra. Umm...what was your name again?”

“...It’s Izaya Orihara.”

“Oh, right, right! Orihara! I’m going to call you Orihara, but you can call me Shinra,” he declared, an oddly selfish kind of demand.

“And why did you want to create a biology club with someone whose name you didn’t even know?” Izaya asked, annoyed.

“Because of what the teacher just said. As long as you have at least two students, you can make your own club here.”

“My point was, why me?”

It was probably just because Shinra had seen him sitting alone in class, but he wouldn’t be able to admit it, Izaya assumed. Hence the question with the answer he already knew—now Izaya could enjoy finding out what response the other boy would give him.

It easily surpassed his expectations.

“You like observing living things, don’t you? You’re cut out for biology.”

“Huh?”

He hadn’t said anything to that effect during his introduction to the class. For a moment, Izaya wondered if Shinra was thinking of someone else, but no other student in the class said anything along the lines of “I like animals,” either.

For some reason, Izaya’s bewilderment bred more confusion in Shinra.

“Huh? But you said it during your introduction.”

“Said what?”

“You said, *‘I like watching people in various occupations.’*”

“...”

He liked watching people.

But Izaya understood that if he described his hobby as “human observation” in an introduction in front of the class, he would only stand out in a bad way. So he phrased it in a way that sounded closer to a proper hobby to escape attention. He just didn’t expect that anyone would take his answer and invite him to join the biology club because of it.

“What does that have to do with biology?”

“People are biological.”

“...”

That simple, obvious answer made Izaya even more intrigued. “Humans are just another species among millions on the planet Earth” was a statement you heard often in these eco-conscious times. No doubt other classmates would appreciate it, too.

But anyone who would bring out that line to describe potential observation targets for a biology club was more than a little off. Izaya hesitated a bit, then shook his head. “Sorry, I’m just not interested.”

“Okay. I guess that’s that, then,” Shinra said, taking Izaya by surprise. “I’ll just try again tomorrow. There’s no time limit to applying for a club.”

“Hang on. Don’t you think my answer is going to be the exact same thing a day from now?” Izaya asked.

He prolonged the conversation not to bust Shinra’s chops but because he was curious and felt that something was *off*, and he wanted to know what that was. But at this point in time, Izaya wasn’t able to decipher the cause of that feeling.

“How about the day after that?”

“Same thing.”

“Please. You can be the club president.”

“Why would you offer me the position that has the most hassle?” Izaya snapped.

It certainly wasn’t the kind of back-and-forth you heard between total strangers, and in fact, it was quite rare for Izaya to engage in banter like this at all.

“Why don’t you just invite someone else who isn’t me? One of your friends from elementary school.”

“Do I look like I have friends?” Shinra replied simply.

“...Sorry. You’re right; you don’t.”

“Too bad! I have one, in fact!”

“Hmm. Can I punch you?” Izaya asked, eyes narrowed.

Shinra ignored him and said, “Unfortunately, that friend is at a different school. So I really don’t have any here.”

“And I doubt you’ll make any, either. Rest in peace. Or should that be ‘you get what you deserve’?”

Izaya was a bit surprised that the responses were coming from him so

freely. His stance on maintaining a neutral distance from others could be broken very easily, as it turned out.

The thought that all kids from other elementary schools might be this way was a very depressing one, but Izaya convinced himself this was a property unique to the Kishitani boy.

“But still, there’s got to be at least one other person who likes biology, right?”

“I don’t know. But there’s another reason I asked you specifically. I don’t actually want someone who’s super into biology and is going to take it all seriously. I really want just the minimum of activity. Like, someone who would raise sea monkeys at the most.”

“What...? So you don’t actually like animals?”

Club activity wasn’t mandatory at this school. If he wasn’t interested, he could just be one of the kids who went home right after class. Why was he so fixated on this club?

But before Izaya could ask the question aloud, Shinra explained, “To be honest, I don’t actually want to run a club... But someone I like said, ‘Ever since elementary school, you haven’t had enough friends, Shinra. Why don’t you try being in a club?’ And since it’s more like a one-sided crush at the moment, I don’t want her to decide she doesn’t like me, so...”

“...I didn’t think there was any human being who cared about you enough to worry like that, to say nothing of having a crush.”

“You really don’t hold your opinions back for someone I just met today. Also, I’d like to offer a correction to your statement about a *human being* who cares enough to worry, but... Oh, never mind. My point is, you look like you’d join the biology club and not bother to care much. C’mon, let’s start a club and look for chupacabras or whatever.”

“That’s...not a biology club.”

Thus, Izaya promptly turned him down on the first day of school—but the unique weirdness of Shinra Kishitani stuck with him, and the very next day, he began a period of focused observation on his classmate. He also took pains to nonchalantly make contact with other students who went to Shinra’s elementary school, in an attempt to build a more accurate profile of him.

“Oh, so that’s the same school that, uh...Kishitani went to, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Hey, Orihara, are you in Kishitani’s class?”

“Yup.”

“He’s weird, right? You can’t tell what the hell he’s thinking.”

This was almost exactly the answer Izaya was anticipating, but he wasn’t disappointed by it. “I don’t wanna say too much, because I don’t like bad-mouthing people, but...it doesn’t seem like he has many friends.”

“Actually, he doesn’t have any... Oh, except for Shizu.”

“Shizu?”

It sounded like a girl’s name. Maybe this was Shinra’s crush, the person who was worried about his social life, Izaya guessed. It took all the next sentence from the other boy’s mouth to prove him wrong.

“It’s this freaky guy named Shizuo... He’s super-tough in a fight and gets mad in a snap, and everyone keeps their distance from him. Kishitani would just walk up to him like it was nothing and ask, ‘Can I dissect you?’ The guy made no sense.”

“Ah, I see your point.”

“But the weird thing is, Shizuo would talk to Shinra like normal...and trust me, he was a freak! He threw the teacher’s desk!”

Threw it? That’s probably just a theatrical way of saying he tipped the desk over.

“Okay, thanks for your help. Let’s hope that guy gets arrested before he hurts anyone,” Izaya commented and left the hall.

He couldn’t have dreamed that he and that “freaky guy” would end up attempting to kill each other on countless occasions.

After that, Izaya continued his secondary education where he left off, paying special attention to the human named Shinra Kishitani—until one day, he came to a realization.

It didn’t arrive during some event or moment of clarity. It just popped into his head out of nowhere, like the instant you realize you forgot something.

Shinra Kishitani represented his exact opposite in life.

He had hardly spent any time watching others. In fact, to be blunt about

it, Shinra Kishitani seemed to *have no interest in humanity at all*.

In the way that Izaya loved watching all different kinds of people, Shinra simply didn't have a care about them in the first place.

What's his deal, then? What does he watch that gives him life?

Izaya had spent his life watching others, and this was a remarkable feature that he'd never seen in a person before. That realization brought a fresh question to his mind. Over a month into the school year, he finally went to Shinra.

"I'm fine with being in your biology club if I'm only the vice president."

He wanted to know why Shinra Kishitani had no interest in people.

So for the purpose of exploring this warped fascination, Izaya decided to play along with Shinra's idea.



<https://mp4directs.com>

It was the birth of the first-ever Raijin Middle School Biology Club.



Twelve years later, Ikebukuro, Raira Academy pool

“So in other words, Iza...you got into some kind of trouble again.”

“...Exasperation...” [I just can’t believe it.]

It was summer vacation, and Raira Academy’s pool was open to its students.

Seated at the poolside, kicking their feet slowly through the glittering water, two girls were busy explaining something to a boy leaning against the fence behind them. He glanced back and forth between their backs and... other features and sighed. “So why are you bothering to tell me this?”

Aoba Kuronuma spoke to them in a much blunter manner than he did with Mikado. “Why did you even bring me here to the pool anyway?” he complained.

Despite his swimsuit, he didn’t seem ready to swim. He wore an open black shirt and stood conspicuously far away from the water.

Mairu Orihara scooped up a handful of pool water and splashed it at his feet. Her relatively athletic body was wrapped in a competition swimsuit, while Kururi wore a bikini with a spiderweb pattern. Neither outfit was according to the school rules, but those didn’t apply outside of school hours.

The Raira Academy school building was eight stories tall, as big as some colleges, and the pool was located on the sixth floor, strangely enough. It was an indoor pool with a glass ceiling so that it could be used on rainy days, and the windows offered a nice view of Ikebukuro.

Aside from the swim team’s activity hours, the pool was open to students during vacation, so anyone could use it provided they brought their school ID. There was no practice today, so the pool was split between racing lanes and a free-swim space.

Kururi and Mairu were kicking their legs into the free area, and the boys nearby were alternately giving them wolf whistles or staring and then hastily turning their gazes away. Aoba was in the latter category, if any, except that he had the advantage over the other boys in that he was there on their invitation.

But he didn't know why yet, so he stood back, playing it cool, as he secretly let his heart throb at the sight of their figures in swimsuits.

Mairu splashed more water at him with glee. "Well, you're curious, aren't you? You want to know more about our weird brother."

"..."

He returned her question with a brief smile.

"I suppose I'll just say that I don't know what you mean."

Their brother, Izaya Orihara, was a spiteful enemy of Aoba's. He and Izaya had sparred remotely through a number of events in the past, and a particular circumstance at the present held them in strict hostility toward each other.

He'd never spoken about this to the twins, but they seemed to know something about it already. He was neither alarmed nor frightened by this circumstance, however. He'd been talking to the two for about four months, and he felt he had a good grasp on what they were like.

Compared with an ordinary family, they hardly had any contact at all with their brother. Instead, they had their own network of information and were surprisingly in the know of the various shadowy goings-on of the city that Aoba had a hand in.

"Look, you don't have to hide it. It's fine; we'll keep it a secret from him."

"You can tell him if you want. He already knows all about me." He looked around, making sure the twins were the only ones within earshot. "If you had a normal family and he knew what I was like, I assume he'd give you a proper warning to 'stay away from that Aoba Kuronuma boy.'"

"Wow, are you self-obsessed or what?"

"You... Fun..." [You're really funny, Aoba.]

Aoba grimaced. He should've expected these reactions from them. "Fine, fine. You got me—I was drunk on myself."

"But don't worry; we have a pretty good idea of what you are, but that doesn't mean we're disgusted by it. And you've helped us out with a bunch of stuff."

"You think too highly of me," he said.

"There was that secret Raira Academy website where somebody was trying to set us up for something awful, and then it just vanished from the Internet all of a sudden," Mairu said. The girls looked up at Aoba, who studiously avoided their gazes.

“Look, let’s not talk about that. So...what’s your sicko of a brother involved in now?”

“Well, according to this guy named Tom...there’s some group, either a gang or a biker group or whatever, and he messed with the girlfriend of their leader. See, our brother used to have a whole bunch of girls following him around. Like a playboy, I think they call it?”

“Passion...” [He’s such a philanderer.]

Aoba pored over this fresh round of information.

Woman troubles, huh? But would Izaya Orihara do something that would earn him such a straightforward grudge? It’s too simple.

But...on the other hand, I guess I don’t really know what people would do when women are involved. I do know he’s not the kind of guy who would get so infatuated with a woman that he’d forget his due diligence.

All the while, the twin girls were splashing and frolicking seductively in the water.

“Kuru, did your boobs get even bigger? Pretty soon you’ll look like Miss Sonohara, or President Kine from the art club, or Miss Yumikawa, the student body vice chair.”

“Negative.” [Stop that.]

“Yet despite your protests, you chose to wear a bikini. That just goes to show how secretly slutty you are! I love it!”

“...Public.” [People are watching.]

Aoba watched the two girls tickle each other in the water, the only betrayal of his cool exterior being the spots of red on his cheeks.

“...Hard to know where to rest your eyes,” he mumbled to himself.

All in all, Aoba was acting thoroughly in line with the innocence of his youth, and he needed something to drive away the impure thoughts that were plaguing his mind. He found that unraveling the mysteries of Izaya Orihara was a good replacement.

So...I know he came back to Ikebukuro. If I feed his location to Shizuo Heiwajima, that might be a good way to vex him...but he’ll just find a new place after he gets away, and that’ll be that. It’s better that we know where he is than to have him in hiding. And I’m sure he knows I know his address.



<https://mp4directs.com>

Aoba understood that trusting in his opponent's ability was the best possible way to give him the maximum caution.

Maybe I'll sit back and test his boundaries for now. I don't want Mikado getting dragged into anything at this point...

His thoughts were abruptly dashed by the feeling of cold water hitting his body.

"Wh-wh-whaat?!"

His shirt was drenched. No sooner had the chilly water landed on him than it began to warm to a tepid temperature. Down in the pool, Mairu had impishly sliced her arm along the surface, which produced the sheet of water that drenched Aoba.

"Don't act like a little kid!"

She'd snuck it past the gaze of the school monitor. There were no admonishing whistles.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Sorry about that! It's what you get for looking so serious at the pool!"

"That's not an apology. Now my clothes are all gross. What am I supposed to do now?" Aoba grumbled, wondering if he'd really been making a face. He took a step closer to Mairu to give her a piece of his mind about his wet clothes—when something soft pressed itself against his back.

"Play..." [Hiya.]

"Huh?"

It was a girl's voice, quiet and seductive, right at his ear.

Only when he recognized that it was Kururi did he understand that she was hugging him from behind.

Huh? What?! Kururi? When did she—?!

Is that soft sensation what I think it is?! Is this some kinda porn game?

Is she...pushing me? Wait, I'm falling...

Aoba turned mid-plunge, a mixture of excitement and surprise on his features, and saw Kururi standing there, a partially deflated beach ball held in her hands.

Oh.

A beach ball?!

So I guess that wasn't her chest.

That's a shame—I mean, good—I mean, I'm fallub-blub-glub

He toppled into the water next to Mairu before he could finish the thought.

When he emerged upright, the other girl in the swimming goggles was cackling. Above him, he heard Kururi say, “Health...?” [Are you all right?]

“All right, enough horsing around!” came a shout from the pool monitor. That prank hadn’t escaped his notice.

“We’re sorry!”

“...Apology...” [I’m sorry.]

“Uh, s-sorry... Wait, it wasn’t my fault. I was the victim!”

After all three of them apologized, Aoba removed his completely drenched shirt and laid it out next to the pool, then gave Mairu and Kururi his meanest side-eye.

“To think I trusted that you weren’t the kind of person to play such pranks, Kururi.”

“When we play pranks, we play them together.”

“Same...” [Exactly.]

“So are you just excited about being at the pool during summer vacation, Kururi?” he asked.

She answered by way of descending into the water again. The two girls took positions surrounding Aoba.

“W-wait! I’m getting out, I’m getting out,” he protested, trying to get away from them, but they each grabbed a hand as he reached for the lip of the pool and dragged him back into the water.

“You know you love this, Kuronuma. Stop trying to hide how excited you are.”

“...Fondness.” [That’s so cute.]

He was a weak-willed boy being humiliated by girls, but all the male classmates who passed by the pool looked at him with envy.

“Hey, Aoba, what’s the deal? Are you *actually* going out with those two?” one of them called out.

“They’re just playing you, dude.”

“Kuronuma doesn’t have the guts to go out with a girl,” they mocked, to hide their naked jealousy. None of them had girlfriends, obviously. But they were completely correct, and Aoba had no response.

He was a bad guy—he’d created the Blue Squares, brought Mikado into them, and plotted to use the Dollars for his own ends—but he had almost no experience interacting with girls, even as friends. He was completely out of his element with these twins.

But his classmates had no idea about that or his secret side, so the only

thing they muttered about among themselves was “Look at that lucky wuss, getting along with those hot twins.”

“Damn, I’m so freakin’ jealous.”

“Should we go somewhere else to look for girls?”

“You know, I heard a story about some upperclassman from Raira hitting on all kinds of girls around town last year.”

“Yeah, I saw him a lot when I was in middle school. I hear he dropped out, though.”

“Really?”

“It was about him eloping with a girl or something.”

“You sure? I heard he got a job so he could save up for their wedding.”

“In any case, I’m jealous. They’ve got girls.”

“...This is getting sad.”

Their attention gradually transitioned away from Aoba, and they trudged off to the locker room to change. Aoba watched them go, then dunked his head into the water and exhaled, cooling both his body and mind.

...And hoping that the girls on either side of him wouldn’t melt the core of malice at the center of his being.



Tokyo

“...So you can see what a problem I’m stuck in. They’re both majorly hot. I was so tempted to just give up on everything and dive right into Kururi’s ample chest.”

“I’ll kill you!” the tall boy snarled into the phone, grinding his teeth.

However, on the other end of the line, Aoba was totally undisturbed.

“I’ve heard you say ‘I’ll kill you’ so many times, I’m bored of it, Yoshikiri. Besides, they’re both gunning for Yuuhei Hanejima, got that? And not as groupies—they’re dead serious. I guess knowing the guy’s brother makes them think they’ve got a decent shot.”

“Aoba...are you really gonna bring up the name of the one guy who practically defines being a player? Are you doing this to me intentionally?”

“Save up your rage at successful men for when we destroy Izaya

Orihara.”

“I’m assuming this Izaya Orihara guy really is a player, then.”

“From what I understand, he had these, like, cultist groupies that followed him around ever since his high school days. And Kururi and Mairu call him stuff like Big Brother and Iza.”

“...All right. I get the picture. And after you were splashing and giggling it up at the pool with those twins, I’ll kill you along with him.”

“So you’re going to kill me either way,” Aoba said, snorting. That mirth only fueled Yoshikiri’s irritation further.

“And you’re just making me mad because you want to die, right? And that’s why you decided to call me?”

“Nope, that’s not it. After I had lunch with the girls, I did some independent research on something Izaya’s been struggling with lately.”

“Lunch?! You had lunch...with two girls?!”

“That wasn’t the point of that statement. Just listen to me. There’s this weird group called Heaven’s Slave that’s selling drugs around Tokyo. They’re squabbling with the Awakusu-kai now.”

“...Never heard of ’em. So what did you eat?”

“Russia Sushi. Anyway...Heaven’s Slave doesn’t get around in Ikebukuro, so it’s no wonder you haven’t heard of them. ’Bukuro’s pretty safe as a general rule, and any place that might deal in that sort of stuff is probably running under Awakusu-kai supervision. They’ve got a guy named Akabayashi who’s legendary for his hatred of drugs.”

“Got it. So you bought these girls lunch, thus putting you into a natural high without the need of chemical assistance. You must be very proud.”

“Actually, they paid for the food. They’re kind of rich, actually.”

“They paid! For! Your! Lunch! Wowwwwww! So you didn’t pay for their food, you didn’t even split the bill; you must feel like such a pimp, eh? They paid for your lunch! And then you came running to tell me about it! Wowwwwwwwww! I’m gonna kill ya! Die!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, Heaven’s Slave is the name of both the dealers’ group and the product itself. Or at least, that’s my assumption. And to finally get to the point, they’re putting out feelers for Izaya Orihara.”

“...How do you know that?”

“There’s a nightclub they’re using as a base right now, and an old friend of mine works there. I was trying to look up something about Izaya, and he happened to have this bit of intel. These guys who normally hang out in a

private room at the club suddenly hit the dance floor and started sniffing around for traces of Izaya Orihara."

"Hang on. Even you know where they hang out, Aoba. You really think the Awakusu-kai yakuza wouldn't know that, too? Why haven't they crushed these guys yet? Or do they have backing from some other mafia?"

"I don't know if there are other yakuza involved, but I bet the Awakusu-kai are waiting for the right moment. There's this guy named Shijima in the group, a college student. His parents are apparently pretty big rollers with weight to throw around. And there's barely any info out there about the group's leader. It'd be easy to get that info if you nab Shijima and some of the others and pry it outta them. But it seems like they're waiting for the right moment to take that step most effectively."

"I see. And do we factor into this somehow?"

"Just watching for now. I don't know how Izaya Orihara figures into it, but it's probably best if we shore up our position now, while we have the chance. We can't just ignore it, obviously, so we'll be watching with maximum vigilance."

"All right. Die."

"Now you're not even justifying your death threats with a logical reason, Yoshikiri... But anyway, the point is, there's some weird stuff afoot. From what I hear, even the remnants of the Yellow Scarves are acting funny."

"Sure it's not your older brother pulling some shit again?"

"No...I'm not talking about the old Blue Squares we had infiltrate them. I mean the guys we were beefing with back then."

"Oh, those guys. The time that we were around seventh or eighth grade, right?"

"You used to brawl it up with high schoolers back then, Yoshikiri. And you almost never lost."

"The ridiculous thing is that for being older than me, they were so much weaker. Seniority's an urban legend, man."

"That's not how the word seniority works, but whatever. Actually, I'm amazed you even know that word. Who'd you hear it from, your grandma?"

"...I'll kill you!"

"I'm telling you, you're really bringing down the value of the death threat, Yoshikiri. I've heard it so many times, it doesn't frighten me anymore. Why do you have such a small vocabulary anyway? Don't you know any words other than I'll, kill, you, and seniority?"

“...~~~!”

Yoshikiri issued a high-pitched screech of rage, gripping the phone so hard the plastic creaked.

In the distance, another boy called out, “Hey, Yoshikiri, pass me the phone.”

“...”

“I’m done over here. *He’s the only one left.*”

Yoshikiri ground his teeth one last time, then tossed the phone to his companion...

...and with his other hand, he *blocked an incoming metal bat.*

“Hello? Hey, it’s me. You know me. Wire me some cash, will ya?” joked the other boy into the phone.

“*Oh, hey, Gin,*” Aoba replied. “*Where’s Yoshikiri?*”

“He’s finishing off the last guy,” said the boy named Gin as he watched Yoshikiri put the heel of his shoe through the front teeth of a rough-looking guy. “He’s so talented, man. *How is he able to fight and talk on the phone at the same time?*”

There were a number of other young men on the ground around Yoshikiri, either unconscious or writhing in pain. He’d taken on all of them with one hand, two feet, and one forehead during his conversation with Aoba.

“And it was all I could do to handle just three of them. But hey, we weren’t able to be around during that whole stalker incident. It’s a shame to the Blue Squares’ name that the one stalker took down so many of our guys. I can’t believe it.”

“*C’mon, don’t take it that way. That stalker was way tougher than he had any right to be. I’m more concerned about that Yellow Scarves guy who took out two of our own elsewhere.*”

“That’s embarrassing, too. Two-on-one, and we lost? When your family gets shown up, so do you. That’s why me and Yoshikiri are out for blood this time, to make up for it. I put out the call for our best muscle to roll over the competition today, and you know what happens? The Nitari brothers wanted to watch some anime, Neko’s with his girl, and Houjou’s asleep. So it was up to just the two of us to do all the damn work.”

There were more victims at Gin’s feet, but he had blood trailing from his

temple, too. It seeped down onto the cell phone.

Aoba didn't sound particularly concerned. *"Yeah, Yoshikiri might be a good fighter, but he's not a good thinker. I'm pretty sure the only word he said over the phone was kill."*

"What? Why? What did you say to him?"

"Just that I went to the pool with Kururi and Mairu."

"Oh, fuck off and die. And why the hell aren't you here anyway?" Gin demanded.

Aoba laughed. *"Sure, I'll die one day. I'm only human. But I'd like to live to be eighty."*

"Really? You think you're gonna get to live another eighty seconds?"

"Why is it that every person in this gang is so unbelievably rude?" Aoba wondered aloud.

"Hey, just be happy you've got someone with you at all. If the real pieces of shit like you didn't have guys like us around, you'd go antisocial and end up spending the rest of your life behind bars!" Gin accused.

"I play good at school, so I actually have lots of friends."

"Okay. Whatever you say. Die. *Shi-ne!* If I wrote that in English, it would be S-H-I-N-E!"

"That's not English, just English letters. Why would I want to shine and sparkle?"

"Uh...shine and sparkle from a nuclear reaction inside your body that kills you, bitch! I hope you burn into ash, loser!" Gin's taunt was like a kid in the schoolyard.

Aoba sensed that this back-and-forth could last forever, so he decided to get down to business. *"So...? How's Mr. Mikado doing?"*

"Oh, he's alive. You wouldn't believe what a wuss he is in a fight. He passed out, so we've got him in the car. He's no better than you or Yatsufusa, actually. I can't imagine why he wanted to participate in purging the Dollars himself. The boss is supposed to hang back and yuck it up while the muscle does the work."

"Actually, I might not be his match in a fight, either," Aoba murmured happily, mostly to himself.

"Even I can't imagine...how he might turn out after all this."



After he hung up, Aoba gazed at the scar on the back of his right hand.

“I really am looking forward to seeing what becomes of you, Mikado.”

Then he recalled something Gin had just said to him: “...If I didn’t have anyone with me at all...? I don’t want to think about it.”

An image floated into his head, the brother of the twins he liked—the face of a man he thoroughly *disliked*.

“I don’t want to turn out like that piece of shit.”

He squinted in displeasure, shut his flip phone, and thought—

Speaking of people hanging around, what’s the connection between that one doctor and Izaya?

The man in the white lab coat had held a scalpel to Aoba’s throat when he’d tried to make contact with the Headless Rider. He seemed dangerous.

You’re just like Izaya Orihara, the man had said.

Aoba reflected on him.

They’re not...simply friends, I suspect.

He’d been curious and looked into it once.

But the answer he found was strange: In middle school, Izaya Orihara stabbed the man who would later be a black market doctor, Shinra Kishitani, in the stomach.

Usually, that would lead to hatred. To enemies.

But they say they were in the same high school after that...

So really, what is their relationship like?



Twelve years ago, summer vacation, Raijin Middle School, biology classroom

“I look forward to your accomplishments, Vice President!” Shinra beamed, clapping him on the shoulder.

Izaya smirked. “I take that to mean you intend to do no work of your own?”

“Whoever said that? I’m just going to cheer you on.”

Shinra was sitting in one of the rotating seats in the biology classroom,

spinning wildly like it was some kind of toy. They'd established the biology club after all, and the school assigned them to the classroom of the same subject. Shinra was the president, and Izaya was the vice president.

Their primary activity was cultivating plants, but because it revolved mostly around carnivorous ones, it wasn't very flashy. Most other students either found the insectivores curious or creepy, and nobody really wanted to be personally involved.

But there were a few eccentrics who joined at the founding, and they performed upkeep on the plants in rotation, which left each individual with little to do. But that was entirely the point—they'd chosen carnivorous plants that were especially easy to care for.

Thus, the brevity of time they had to dedicate to the club was second only to those with no extracurriculars at all, and as long as they had containers with actual plants growing in them, no one could accuse them of propping up a fake club for credit.

But when summer vacation came around, their faculty advisor told them they'd be making a presentation at the school culture festival, so they needed to plan some kind of exhibition now while they had time. Someone had to visit the school to take care of the plants anyway, a duty that Izaya accepted, though they told the school they would be coming on rotation.

Now, on the first day of summer vacation, they were supposed to have a meeting at the clubroom with all members present. But all the others preferred not to come to school at all and told Shinra or Izaya on the last day before vacation that they'd let the two bosses handle everything.

"Since everyone else just ditched us, I guess that means we get to make all the decisions. And since I fully intend to press all the responsibilities onto you, that means you get to call the shots. Good for you!"

"Let's see. Here's my idea: You die right here, then I observe the state of your decomposition and display the results at the culture festival," Izaya replied. It sounded like something a serial killer would do—but aside from the fact that an individual couldn't legally do this in Japan, Izaya understood that this was, in fact, a legitimate area of study. There was a research group that placed cadavers in various places and examined the results for science.

Let's see, where is it...? he wondered, consulting his memory. To his good fortune, Shinra saved him the trouble.

"Ah yes, there was a lab at a college in Tennessee that's attempting that experiment, if I recall. They call it a body farm, don't they? They receive

donated corpses and place them in various environments, then take detailed data from the decomposition, insect festering, and so on. That forensic data helps the police estimate the time of death in murder cases, for example,” he blathered.

“You’re...rather well acquainted,” Izaya remarked, surprised.

“Dad’s a researcher for Nebula. He always talks about stuff like that during dinner.”

“I think I’m beginning to see why your mother left him.”

“Hey, I didn’t think you remembered that bit from my introduction.” Shinra laughed. He wasn’t upset at all about the crack at his family. Without losing his smile, he followed that up with “But I wonder...what would happen if we didn’t decompose?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t mean saponification, when we’re preserved well enough that our body fat just hardens up. I mean, if a dead body stays perfectly pristine, does that mean it can be a proper object of love for other people?”

What the fuck is he talking about? Izaya wondered. Was Shinra confessing that he was a necrophiliac?

But as usual, rather than anything else, Izaya found this idea quite fascinating. He said nothing, waiting for Shinra to continue.

For his part, the other boy didn’t act like he’d just confessed some deep secret. Quite matter-of-factly, he said, “What if there was an incredibly beautiful dead woman, like the only thing that was different was that her heart wasn’t beating?”

Okay, so this is a necrophilia thing. Izaya always felt that Shinra was bizarre; now he was excited to hear whatever sexual fetish lurked under this eccentric’s exterior.

Then the conversation took an odder turn.

“The body never decays. It’s just a body that looks beautiful. But you can’t truly experience love with a body. You can love it, but it can’t return that love, can it? It’s just a dead body.”

“Of course it can’t. The best you could do is a ventriloquist act, if you had an overactive imagination.”

“But what if the body could move around?”

“...You mean...it’s a zombie?” Izaya replied, but Shinra was quite serious.

“No, I don’t think that’s the right term. It’s not all gross and decaying

like that. So let's say you've got a dead body moving around that doesn't decompose. In other words, if it went from a dead body that ought to decompose to a perfectly preserved zombie...could you reach a mutual understanding? Could you fall in love with it?"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"What if the zombie was nice? One that didn't eat brains or bodies? What if it could understand us, like at the level of a dog? What if that zombie could give you the gentlest smile you'd ever seen? What if that zombie could talk to you like a normal person and tell silly jokes, and the only difference was that its heart wasn't beating?"

The president of the biology club tapped on a container holding one of their carnivorous plants as he spoke. He was too straightforward about this to be joking, yet the subject matter was so nonsensical that it was impossible to take seriously.

"If it didn't decompose, still looked pristine, and could tell jokes...then I guess that would be more like a special kind of human being that could move around without a working heart...right?"

"And what if that zombie didn't have an upper half? Say, she could writhe her gorgeous hips and use her shapely feet to write on paper in order to communicate?"

"That seems...much less human."

Izaya was having a very hard time figuring out where Shinra was taking this. It was very rare that Izaya felt confusion on account of someone else, but for whatever reason, this boy's statements had an oddly bewildering effect on him.

The extent of Izaya's conclusion about the last few months was that *something* made Shinra Kishitani different from anyone else he'd seen before.

"Would it be weird to fall in love with a zombie that's only a lower half?"

"I guess it would be more like a foot fetish that's so extreme it becomes weird?"

"Ah, I see. I hadn't thought of it that way," Shinra remarked, impressed. Izaya had no idea what was so profound about his sarcasm.

"If loving a human is normal," Shinra continued, "and anything else is abnormal, where does the boundary lie? Assuming that the kind of familial love you feel for pets is something else entirely."

“...?”

“If being alive or dead is one such boundary, then what about someone who’s not alive, not dead, not human, but incredibly close to it? If you fell in love with such a person, would that be normal...or weird? What determines abnormality, and what makes something proper? I’m sure the location of that boundary changes for each person, of course.”

Just then, a fly in the room approached the planter and landed on a Venus flytrap, causing its jaws to snap shut and trap the insect in a cage of green.

Shinra looked off into the distance and commented, “If that plant could somehow communicate with us through telepathy, do you think we could reach an understanding? Do you think it would be abnormal to feel love or friendship with it?”

...No, really, what the hell is he talking about? Izaya wondered, his mind racing behind his placid exterior. He reached one possible answer.

Not alive but not dead... So, like a manga character?

Is that what this is about? He’s looking for advice about being in love with some anime girl? Seems weird to compare her to a zombie without an upper half or whatever.

“Look, I don’t think it’s a huge deal. Some folks like to give their plants names and treat them like people. I don’t know if any of them get so attached that it’s the same level of attraction they feel toward the opposite sex, though. And as long as they’re not hurting anyone, who cares who they love?”

In truth, Izaya enjoyed observing people in the act of harming others for the sake of love, but he chose to hide his true nature and play the role of common sense here. But once again, Shinra went in an unexpected direction.

“Actually, I want to love, even if it does mean hurting someone.”

“Whoa, what?” Izaya snorted.

This Shinra Kishitani guy... He’s just weird.

He doesn’t watch people. He’s not like me. Not like the others.

Shinra has no interest in people. But...that’s not the entire explanation, either.

He doesn’t hate people, or look down on those around him, or even feel disgust at the world. That’s not the reason for his lack of interest.

He just doesn’t see them. It’s like he’s so obsessed with something, people are just part of the background.

...This guy... What in the world is he seeing? I can’t tell what the object of his obsession is.

I would understand if it was some character in a manga or a movie. Some people are just like that...but I feel like Shinra is different.

Shinra noticed that Izaya was lost in thought. He waved his hand in denial and said, “You don’t have to think that hard about it. That was just an example, the thing about hurting people. Anyway, can I ask you to watch the plants for real? I’ll come and do my part, like once or twice a week.”

The sudden shift in topic was jarring; Izaya still wanted to follow up with the other thing. But due to his policy of staying at a comfortable distance, he didn’t speak his mind directly.

I’ve got time. I can figure out what his deal is at my own pace.

He flashed Shinra his usual breezy smile and shrugged. “Yeah, sure. I feel better at least coming to school periodically, rather than just being on vacation the entire time.”

“Okay, cool. I mean, I’d prefer to be at home as much as possible. I just don’t want my family to think I’m not taking my club activity seriously or whatever.”

“Good point. And there’s a bit too much here to actually take it home to care for it,” Izaya said, noting the numerous planters arranged on the sills of the biology class windows.

Shinra was quickly putting his things away, perhaps sensing he had talked too much about *something*, whatever it was. “Well, I’m going to leave. I’ll come to water them on Friday. Just call me if anything happens before that point.”

“Sure. Until then, I’ll enjoy being the king of the biology class.”

“Just watch out for revolutions. You’re the kind of guy who gets sloppy and winds up guillotined by the common folk.”

“That’s...quite an appraisal.”

For not having any interest, he sure is sharp. And in this case, I have to agree with him, Izaya noted critically.

Shinra scampered out of the room. He was smiling like a little kid who was looking forward to his school field trip. There must’ve been something great waiting for him at home.

What a weird guy. I’ll have to keep observing him. But it’s dangerous to get too close. Gotta be cautious, Izaya thought, more sure than ever about Shinra Kishitani’s abnormality. He looked up at the ceiling and smirked.

“King of the biology class, huh?” he repeated, pleased with himself. “This is looking very convenient for my purposes.”

One month after that, the king of the biology class's reign came to an end in a most unpredictable way.

He would be ushered into police custody for the crime of stabbing the club president, Shinra Kishitani—an outcome that even Izaya could not have imagined at this point in time.



Twelve years later, Rakuei Gym

“Your brother?” Akane Awakusu asked.

Dressed in her black karate *gi*, Mairu kicked at a sandbag. “That’s... right! When you...left! Yesterday, the...guy! Who got out of your...car! Was my broth...er! Izaya Oriha...ra!”

She punctuated every few syllables with a different kind of kick, her feet thudding against the heavy bag.

“Izaya?” Akane repeated, looking befuddled.

“Why, do you recognize the name? Were those scary Awakusu-kai guys talking about him?”

“No. It’s the same name as someone I know,” the little girl said.

Mairu stopped kicking and reached out to steady the bag before turning her head to ask, “Oh yeah? I thought Izaya was a pretty rare name... Maybe it is Iza, just in disguise.”

“It’s not. He was much skinnier than your brother, Mairu... And he said Izaya wasn’t his first name; it was his last name.”

“Oh, I see. Well, anyone’s better than my brother. Stay away from him for your own good, okay?” Mairu warned. She didn’t ask Akane anything else about the story, because she wasn’t really interested to begin with.

She went back to training against the sandbag.

For her part, Akane recalled the man she knew named Izaya.

There was Nakura, the woman she’d met online. Nakura then put her in touch with another man she knew, the one who’d given her advice on how to survive as a runaway.

He taught her about Shizuo Heiwajima and gave her a stun gun. Thinking back on it now, with a clearer mind, he’d been very fishy in a way.

But she hadn’t told anyone in the Awakusu-kai, including her father,

about Izaya or Nakura. If they found out about the involvement those two had in her runaway spree, who knew what her father might do to them in secret. She couldn't bear the thought.

So Akane had been quite steadfast in protecting the names Nakura and Izaya under duress—even though she was at least knowledgeable enough now to recognize that something had been off about them.

And after that point, I stopped getting messages from Nakura...

Even still, Akane prayed that the people she'd encountered hadn't met an untimely fate at the hands of the Awakusu-kai.

I wonder what they're doing now.



Tokyo, in a vehicle

“So, you suspect that Orihara asshole, Mr. Shiki?” asked the young driver.

From the backseat, Shiki muttered, “Just a hunch, that’s all. Got nothing behind it yet.”

“But he seemed totally cool when he and Miss Akane met face-to-face yesterday...and she was acting like she’d never met him before.”

“Maybe so. But even if he was involved in her running away from home, I doubt he’s stupid enough to have put himself out there directly. I really was just dropping him off along the way to picking her up yesterday, honest.”

His voice was tense and thick, the emotion physically suppressed beneath it. Shiki had no intention of speaking his truthful mind after that.

The driver sensed the land mine waiting there and cleverly altered the subject.

“You think that Orihara guy’s gonna find something on Amphisbaena?”

“I’m not holding out hope. But I’m not counting him out, either. He’s clearly got a different set of information sources than ours.”

“And we can’t just...take his over or something?” the driver asked, unable to leave the fascinating topic of Izaya alone.

Shiki just shook his head.

“If the way his system worked was that straightforward, we’d have done it already. And for one thing, he’s impervious to threats, and his network

vanishes if we kill him. The best answer is just to use him properly. Well... second-best, maybe,” he said, correcting himself.

He glared at the man in the driver’s seat and warned, “It might be best for the Awakusu-kai if we simply get rid of him altogether, rather than make use of him. But we just don’t know that yet. He’s that tricky of a man to deal with, got it?”

“You could get rid of him easy if you wanted to, Mr. Shiki.”

“You think so? I’ve heard he does business with the Medei-gumi directly. So as their subordinates, if we want to kill him, we’d better have a damn good reason. We’d have to tell them he’s playing with fire and that it’s going to be the death of you.”

It was probably Shiki’s idea of a joke, but the driver felt terror in his spine as though needles of ice were being inserted there. He was done asking about Izaya at last.

For his part, Shiki held his silence and considered what had happened over the Golden Week holiday.

The biggest question is Shizuo Heiwajima. Why did he come to the place where our guys got whacked?

Over Golden Week, the gang’s leader-in-waiting, Mikiya Awakusu, secretly paid Vorona and Slon, a pair of guns for hire, to eliminate some moles in their midst—but for whatever reason, Shizuo Heiwajima appeared on the scene, which forced the Awakusu-kai to mark him as a wanted man.

It’s certainly possible that Izaya Orihara would’ve known about Slon’s job, because even if Slon himself didn’t give away the game, Orihara would be able to follow or tap him and put the picture together for himself. Then, right at the moment that he’d have finished his hit job against the Awakusu-kai moles, he lured Shizuo Heiwajima to the spot of the hit...

You really couldn’t pull that off unless you knew about the nature of the job beforehand. I suppose I should assume there was some other connection there, aside from Slon and his contract.

But if one thing’s for sure, it’s that you can’t trust Izaya Orihara.

Eventually, the driver gave in to the pressure of Shiki’s silence. Glancing through the rearview mirror, he asked, “How’s the other thing going? Those students who are messing with Mr. Akabayashi.”

“Ah...them. We’ve got a handle on one kid who’s high on their totem pole. The problem is, his dad and gramps are big civic figures. If we piss them off, we’ll have more problems on our hands than just inside the Medei-

gumi.”

“What’s the plan, then?”

“Honestly, the ideal scenario would be if the people distributing Heaven’s Slave ended up in a death struggle with Amphisbaena, but...”

Shiki chose not to say the second half of that sentence aloud. He merely thought it.

...But writing that scenario requires the Amphisbaena info we hired Izaya Orihara to get...and I don’t like that, not one bit.



Tokyo, rooftop

“Hi there, courier. Were you enjoying your time with Shinra last night?” Izaya asked, his typical smirk greeting Celty, despite the fact that she found it very unpleasant.

With obvious disgust, she typed, “*Don’t you dare try to imagine what our home life is like. What kind of enjoyment are you imagining?*”

“Well, that’s rather hostile. I would have figured that you’d take my statement as positive acknowledgment that you and Shinra have a very cozy relationship.”

“Anyway, I heard about a little something.”

“Heard about what?” Izaya replied without a hint of curiosity.

She shoved her PDA into his face. “*About the scar on Shinra’s torso.*”

“...”

“He fessed up and told me the entire story.”

“For whatever reason, he really will tell you anything. Even in high school, I don’t think he told a single soul about that,” Izaya grumbled, shaking his head. The grin he wore suggested that he expected this might happen, however. That was enough to convince Celty.

“You can’t be trusted.”

“What next, then? Will you quit the job?”

“No, that’s a different story. Whatever happened in the past, you’re still one of Shinra’s few friends. Technically speaking.”

“Friend...? Do you really suppose Shinra thinks of me and Shizu as

friends?” He chuckled.

“What do you mean?” she shot back.

“He has no interest in people. Out of everything in this wide, wide world, the only thing he’s *truly* paying attention to is you. Shizu and I might think of Shinra as a friend, but he barely notices us. In the end, he’ll always prioritize you. I bet the only reason he puts up with the two of us is because you told him something about treasuring his friends years back, didn’t you?”

Celty’s fingers paused. It was true that she’d been saying something like that to Shinra for ages.

Shinra had once helped out at Yagiri Pharmaceuticals in order to fulfill his own desired love, she recalled. *He would even lie to me if it would allow him to be with me.*

But ultimately, he captured her heart for good on the very night this lie was exposed.

She envisioned Shinra as she knew him, based around her connection to him—and slumped her shoulders.

“...I suppose I can’t dismiss that out of hand. He’s not the type of person to distinguish between good and evil, and it’s questionable if what he feels toward you and Shizuo is what normal people would call ‘friendship.’”

“Right?”

“But what is ‘normal friendship’ anyway? Can you really define something that nebulous?”

She understood the special nature that defined her and Shinra—but she couldn’t deny that hearing Izaya insult her man made her angry.

“Besides, you’re pretty abnormal, too, if you think the only thing that defines a friend is whether they prioritize you or not.”

“You’re mistaken. I think of everyone in the world, including Shinra—well, not Shizu, obviously—as being my friends, and my lovers, and my family.”

“So you’ve got an interest in every human being alive, and Shinra has none. I still think Shinra’s the more normal of the two of you,” Celty argued, unable to help herself. Really, she just wanted to get to the topic of the job.

Izaya spread his hands in a gesture of wounded pride. “Shinra’s more normal than me? Listen, I’m not trying to insult him, but if you really heard the entire story of his scar, then you must understand, right? Shinra’s *never been normal.*”

“You might be right about that.”

“And you’re the one who drove him crazy. You might not have intended for it to happen, but Shinra Kishitani was nevertheless bewitched by a dullahan—an otherworldly being. It might be his own belief that you are greater than human, but once that idea took root, it only makes sense that he’d consider humanity to be of lower importance, right?”

He was obviously trying to rattle Celty, but she neither avoided his challenge nor felt bothered by it.

“Yes, I understand that. I’ve never thought of myself as being all that special, but I do agree that it might be because of me that Shinra ended up so abnormal.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m not going to do anything. I’ll be with Shinra to the end,” she declared.

Izaya’s eyes slid away. He snorted. “Is that meant to be some kind of atonement? Don’t you know that spoiling him will only make Shinra’s hatred of humanity—no, not hatred, his disinterest in humanity—even worse?”

“Maybe it will. But right now...I don’t want to be separated from him. I realized this stronger than ever when he recently got hurt. I can’t forgive those who hurt him, and I’m willing to play along with your distasteful work to get even.”

“...”

“You see, Shinra does love me...and I love him, too.”

Izaya read the long, long message, and his lips loosened into a little smile. He shrugged and turned his back on Celty. “You’re making me embarrassed just by reading that. I wonder if the reason you can say that without pause is either because you’re more human than human or because you’re not human at all... But in either case, you’re a monster, so I’m not interested.”

“You’re all talk.”

“But I’ve got nothing else to say.”

Izaya walked toward the rooftop fence and picked up a bag that had been resting against it.

“So, let’s discuss this job.”



Several minutes later

Outside the building, the rider in the black suit rubbed the seat of her motorcycle. In the figure's left hand was a black carrying bag for a laptop—the item Izaya Orihara had entrusted to the courier.

A man hiding behind a vending machine spoke into his phone.

“It's the Black Rider. Confirmed.”

On the other end of the line was a soft-spoken man. *“So the rider's connected to Izaya Orihara.”*

“Hey, Shijima, what's Kumoi saying?”

“He's curious as to what Orihara's ferrying around, but we know for sure that he's been looking into Amphisbaena the last few days. Maybe he's already found something.”

“Shall I keep watching?”

“...Nah, we don't want the Awakusu-kai destroying Amphisbaena. Remember, the whole point of this is for us to take over their system entirely.”

Shijima's Heaven's Slave group learned about the existence of Amphisbaena shortly after Akabayashi dealt the drug dealers a devastating setback. Among their buyers was someone who'd made some money at Amphisbaena's secret casino, so as a test, they snuck a few of their own in to gamble there.

But after a few times trying their luck, every one of their friends stopped getting the usual notices informing them of the location of the next casino event, all at once. Shijima had to assume that Amphisbaena were onto them.

In fact, that customer of theirs who had first told them about Amphisbaena also stopped getting the notices, and he complained that it was their fault. However, that gentleman didn't argue for long once they threatened to withhold his drugs.

They found the reason for their being disinvited quite easily. The casino used special chips in the shape of large coins that were only distributed to members. They served as identification when making a bet and recorded wins and losses electronically.

Upon dismantling one and examining it, they found what looked like a bug and a transmitter. Amphisbaena must've been gleaning information

through the chips, which helped them identify potential sources of danger that they ought to close out of the loop.

The devices didn't have very powerful batteries, of course, but the chips were exchanged for new ones at every casino event. They claimed it was to prevent against tampering with internal data, but in light of this new information, it seemed clear that it was actually so they could pop in fresh batteries on a short turnaround.

With an intercept and a GPS transmitter, they could effectively collect the secrets of their members and utilize that information for extortion and blackmail when needed. But if anyone found out about the transmitter, it would lead to trouble. Shijima suspected it must've sent some kind of emergency signal when dismantled, which ensured that they could cut loose any casino members who violated their trust.

"Kumoi wants that system. I think it's quite fascinating myself. If we choose our place carefully, we could even create our own new network for selling Heaven's Slave. I'd like to have connections to get those bugs and transmitters wholesale, too."

"So we're not going to just destroy them," said the man watching the Black Rider.

On the other end of the line, Shijima said, *"That's right. Just a discussion...or a fair transaction at the minimum should be sufficient. And there's no point to any of it if we don't have personal information on who we're dealing with."*

"And that's what we're leaving up to this Izaya Orihara guy."

"That's right. If he's doing this on behalf of the Awakusu-kai, we've got to handle him before he finishes the job."

"Handle?" the man repeated.

If there was any doubt as to the clinical nature of that term, Shijima eliminated it by making his meaning ice clear. *"We don't want the Awakusu-kai finding out this stuff. Once we've got the information, it would be best if he quietly vanished."*

"So you're gonna kill him?"

"Don't say that out loud in the open. What if someone overhears you?"

"Wait, I thought you said that in the worst-case scenario, we could at least make a deal with him," protested the man, unnerved by the ease with which Shijima suggested a hit.

“That was referring to Amphisbaena,” clarified Shijima, who seemed confused. “They’re at odds with the Awakusu-kai. But Izaya Orihara is working for them. So how would we join forces with him?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Why are you so pessimistic about this? Yes, we failed, but the point is, we’ve already attempted to kill Akabayashi before.”

“But he’s just a civilian,” said the man, still persisting.

Shijima’s tone stayed even. “Dogs working on the Awakusu-kai’s orders aren’t ‘just civilians.’”

“But...”

“Hang on. I just got a message from Mr. Kumoi.”

“...?!”

The lookout’s mind, which was still lukewarm with indecision, instantly froze as though clutched by dry ice at the mention of Kumoi’s name.

“I’ve got to go see him.”

“...Are you...serious?”

“Yeah...I might have some new scars to show off next time.” Shijima sighed. He chuckled and suggested, “Maybe I’ll force Izaya Orihara to pay the price for these injuries.”

With a little smile, Shijima offered one last bit of evidence for his argument.

“See? Now we’ve got another reason to kill him, don’t we?”



Twelve years ago, last day of summer vacation, Raijin Middle School

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well, it’s not your problem, is it?”

“Hey, I told my family that I thought of you as a friend.”

“And?”

“So if it becomes a question of why my friend was doing this and I didn’t stop him...that’s a problem for me.”

“Are you an idiot, Shinra? It’s like you have no free will of your own. Are you just a puppet who does what your family says?”

“I’m fine with being a puppet if it means I’m connected by a string to someone I care about.”

“This is a pointless conversation.”

A student from the art club happened to overhear this quiet argument on the way past the biology room. It was clearly a disagreement but didn’t seem likely to escalate into a fight, so the student continued onward.

Five minutes later...

“What was that sound?!” demanded a PE teacher who’d been giving lessons down on the field and came running up to the room when he heard the sound of breaking glass.

He found a student on the ground, tape wrapped around his bloodied torso. His face was pale and his breathing shallow.

“Kishitani?! What happened?!”

Shinra Kishitani gave a bloodless smile to reassure the teacher and quietly muttered, “I got...stabbed a bit. Can you...call an...ambulance?”

A few hours later, Izaya Orihara finally made his appearance, turning himself in to the police for processing.

The vice president of the biology club stabbed the president and then ran.

What happened between the two? Shinra Kishitani and his father did not file charges, and the school was terrified of what the news would do to appearances—so the incident simply faded into the shadows of history, never reported.

The only permanent records of it were on Shinra’s stomach and Izaya’s past.

Chat room

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The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

TarouTanaka has entered the chat.

TarouTanaka: Hello.

TarouTanaka: It's been quite a while.

TarouTanaka: I just read the backlog. It looks like we've had many new people join.

TarouTanaka: My name is TarouTanaka.

TarouTanaka: I'm sorry I haven't been available recently.

TarouTanaka: I think it's likely I won't be able to visit for a while yet.

TarouTanaka: Oh, not because I'm in trouble or anything, just that I'm busy...

TarouTanaka: If I'm able to drop by again, I'll try to be a newcomer and make up for lost time.

TarouTanaka: I'd like to be able to enjoy some fun chats about Ikebukuro with Setton and everyone else.

TarouTanaka: Well, that's all.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: This is visible only to you, Kanra. I mean, Mr. Orihara.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I'm not sure if you're seeing this or not, but I wanted to say it anyway.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I'm involved in a bunch of stuff right now.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: You might be aware of it already.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: But I'm not doing any of this because someone else told me to.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I just wanted you, of all people, to know that it's of my own volition.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: Honestly, I'm afraid.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: But I know that this is something I need to do...

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: Maybe I shouldn't be wasting your time with all of this. I'm sorry.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: You can totally ignore all of this if you want...

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I just wanted to make sure that at least someone else witnessed how I'm feeling right now...

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: Just having that knowledge will be a source of strength for me.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: At our first meeting last year, you said something to me.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: “If you truly want to escape the ordinary, you need to keep evolving.”

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: But I wasn't able to evolve.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I wanted to cling to my ordinary life.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I want to have the same life with Sonohara and Masaomi that I had before.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I want to take it back.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I want those Dollars. From that night.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I'm not looking for the extraordinary anymore.

<Private Mode> TarouTanaka: I just want those days to come back to me.

Bacura has entered the chat.

Bacura: Hello.

Bacura: TarouTanaka,

Bacura: It's too bad you won't be able to come for a while.

Bacura: Let's talk again sometime.

<Private Mode> Bacura: Mikado,

<Private Mode> Bacura: If it's about the other day,

<Private Mode> Bacura: I'm not worried about it.

<Private Mode> Bacura: In fact,

<Private Mode> Bacura: From your and Anri's perspective,

<Private Mode> Bacura: I'd expect you to still be mad about me up and leaving like that.

<Private Mode> Bacura: But,

<Private Mode> Bacura: There's one thing I want to say.

TarouTanaka: Hello, Bacura.

TarouTanaka: Well, thanks for letting me say my mind, everyone.

TarouTanaka: So long.

TarouTanaka has left the chat.

<Private Mode> Bacura: Mikado.

<Private Mode> Bacura: There was a bit of time between then and when you logged off,

<Private Mode> Bacura: Were you messaging someone in Private Mode?

<Private Mode> Bacura: I'm not going to ask who,

<Private Mode> Bacura: But listen,

<Private Mode> Bacura: I want to get in touch,

<Private Mode> Bacura: When you log in again, check the log,

<Private Mode> Bacura: And if you feel like talking, respond to me here.

<Private Mode> Bacura: I'll call you.

Bacura has left the chat.

The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.
The chat room is currently empty.

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In a Dark Place 5

“So, Izaya Orihara. You’re friends with that Black Rider, huh?”

“...”

“You’ve had that urban legend riding around and looking for scoops on us, haven’t you? As well as Heaven’s Slave. Did you have the rider contact them, perhaps?”

“...”

In the darkened bar, Earthworm was still talking to the hooded man.

The cake had been put away however long ago, and there were now three dozen two-liter bottles of mineral water neatly arranged on the counter of the bar instead.

As usual, Earthworm was doing all the talking; the man with the sack over his head said nothing in response.

Did that count as conversation? For Earthworm’s part, she certainly felt like they were sharing a mental connection.

“Like I said earlier, neither the owner nor I know much about them...but if they’re going to get in our way, we need to crush them soon. So if there’s anything you know about this Heaven’s Slave, I’d love to hear it now.”

“...”

“In either case, once your sisters arrive, you’ll want to talk, I think. Or should I smash your fingers one by one with a hammer? There’s still a stain on that table from the last person we had to do that to... Wanna see? Oh, right! You can’t see through that sack! Ha-ha, sorryyy!”

Beneath the hood, her conversation partner’s face and mind alike were racked with fear. The repetition of threats was the only way Earthworm knew how to communicate, and it was the only time she felt a connection to another person.

“You know, I think you and I can get along much, much better.”

“...”

She put one hand to his neck and held a bottle in her other. Liquid sloshed around inside it, loud enough so that he could hear.

“Want respite?”

“...”

“Don’t want to die?”

“...”

“Worried about your sisters? Or about yourself?”

“...”

The man maintained his silence throughout each of the rapid-fire questions.

But Earthworm was happy with that. Silence was, in fact, the very thing that fed her soul more than anything else.

Even though she hadn't been inflicting any direct pain, the woman sensed that the man's commitment to silence was considerable. Normally, a person would at least hurl back an insult or two by now, but he'd been admirable in his restraint.

“Say, are you feeling secure in your situation? Are you finding solace in the idea...that you and your sisters couldn't possibly be killed today? You wouldn't do that, would you? I mean, you couldn't...not if you'd actually found out what we're like.”

Earthworm giggled and slowly unscrewed the cap on the bottle.

“I love our owner! I would do anything for the owner.”

“...”

“And I mean *anything*...”

She chuckled darkly. The bottle tilted over the burlap sack until the liquid inside slowly poured out. It dripped in fine formations with hardly any splatter, maximizing the amount that seeped into the fabric. She rotated the bottle carefully and evenly around his head so that the entirety of the sack was soaked but not his clothes or the floor.

“I would've been fine with using acid to melt that bag and your face into disgusting blobs, but I wasn't feeling how gnarly and sinister that is. I wanted a different effect... Something brighter!”

As she spoke, the smell of the liquid filled the room. It was a very distinct odor that was obvious to anyone who'd smelled it before: kerosene. Not as distinct as in the moment of extinguishing a kerosene lamp but plenty strong enough to identify it.

“Are you holding up? Not suffocating? And don't breathe in too hard and get high, okay? Wait, does kerosene get you high the way paint thinner does? Anyway...”

“...”

“Well, when your sisters get here, we'll be doing a variety of things to them...and at about the halfway point, I'll burn the sack, okay? Then it'll

burn off, and you'll be able to see exactly what's happening to them. You'll want to hold your breath when it's burning, okay? The fire will suck the oxygen out of your lungs. No guarantees on how many minutes that will take to finish."

If she actually lit a fire, the burns would make it impossible not to breathe, but she knew that already.

What kind of face would emerge when the sack burned away?

Fear of death? Sadness at what was happening to his sisters? Boundless rage? Despair? Or eyes full of purpose, having not lost their hope?

Any one of them would do, thought Earthworm.

"I wonder what people will do. If they're placed in a desperate situation with a loved one, will they care for themselves in the final moment or for the other? I happen to think human beings are designed to prioritize themselves in the end. Do you know anything about that, info dealer? You've got lots of information about human beings, right?" Earthworm asked. It was an impossible question to answer, and because of that, she didn't expect an answer for it, either.

The real purpose of the question was to fan the flames of his fear and unease. But her total inability to get a rise out of him was impressing her.

What move could she make to put pressure on him now? Go with the classics and pull out his fingernails, or remove his clothes and use a soldering iron to tattoo a message on his skin?

She was just about to lose her battle against restraint and move to actual physical torture when the sound of multiple footsteps came from the entrance of the bar.

"Oh, we're out of time..."

"...!"

"Looks like your sisters have arrived. ☆"

Like a housewife signing off on a long-awaited home delivery, Earthworm leaped to her feet. But instead of heading over herself, she delegated the duty to another woman.

"Go and open the door."

The young woman obeyed and headed to the entrance. As she watched her go, Earthworm told her captive, "It's a moving family reunion! I do believe I might shed some tears!"

"..."

She giggled in anticipation of the coming scene...

...but the mirth stopped within just a few seconds.

When her subordinate opened the door to let the visitors in, they were not the people Earthworm expected—*but a group of about ten unfamiliar young men.*

Who?!

Are they the info dealer's men?! No way!

The Awakusu-kai? No, they're too young!

How did they know this place? I mean, who are they?!

They can't be cops. They look younger than me...

Who? Enemies? Friends? Danger?

Owner... Help me, Owner!

The thoughts echoed and burst through her mind, until at last, she settled on the one figure she trusted more than any other to come to her aid.

Though no one answered that silent call of hers, of course.

Her companions were just as shocked as she was, wary of the intruders at the entrance. But the young man at the center of their group simply spread his hands and spoke bracingly to the entire bar.

“Greetings, members of Amphisbaena. We are not *yet* your allies, but neither are we your enemies.”

“...Who are you?” Earthworm demanded. Unlike the wheedling taunt she used with the man in the burlap sack, her voice was now taut and sharp with instant vigilance.

The young man identified her as the central figure of the group and made an obsequious bow. “Pardon me. My name is Shijima.”

“I am the second-in-command for distribution of the Heaven’s Slave drug.”

Then time rewound to half a day earlier.

CHAPTER 5
Izaya Orihara



Chapter 5: Izaya Orihara

Tokyo, on the street

“Hey... What’s that the courier’s holding?” asked one of Heaven’s Slave’s young dealers to his companion.

The other one sighed and muttered, “Same thing as yesterday, a laptop bag.”

“You think it’s a laptop in there?”

“Probably. Or money or...casino chips, maybe.”

This was the third day they’d been keeping tabs on the Black Rider and Izaya Orihara. They considered just abducting Izaya directly, since he probably knew something they could use, but he had Dragon Zombie goons for protection, so they couldn’t get him while he was on the move. He was also quick enough to give them the slip when they tried following him back to his hideout, so they couldn’t get to him that way, either.

As for the Black Rider, they could trace the urban legend on the job, but once again were unable to follow the trail back to any kind of home base. On the bright side, they were able to put together a good picture of what the rider was doing on the errand.

At each location, the courier made contact with people of various positions and affiliations. One of them just so happened to be a Heaven’s Slave customer, so when they called him later, they learned that he was *also* a client of Amphisbaena’s underground casino, and he claimed he’d been asked over and over about that.

By using his drug source as leverage, they were able to pry some interesting information out of him: The Black Rider had bought his Amphisbaena chip at a truly preposterous price. He seemed to think he could just claim that he “lost it” the next time the casino opened, but they would likely never contact him again.

More concerning was the fact that the Black Rider was collecting the casino’s electronic chips, riding around in search of several different

members to retrieve them from. That occupied the young men's attention and drew it away from Izaya.

Following in their car, the dealers eventually realized the Black Rider was taking a different action from usual today. She stopped the bike on the side of the road, pulled a laptop out of the bag, and opened it up.

"...What's going on there?" said the thug in the passenger seat, watching the woman through a pair of binoculars. He was able to make out what looked to be a map on the screen.

The rider closed the laptop and stuffed it back into the bag without turning it off. It was probably in some kind of sleep mode. As they followed the motorcycle, the dealers decided to call Shijima and relay this new information.

"Is there any way you can steal that laptop?"

They wanted to explain that it was impossible, but the mental image of the member with the dart stuck in the bridge of his nose convinced them to at least say, "We'll try," before hanging up.

"Steal it...? How we gonna do that?"

"We can't just hit the bike to make it stop, not in the middle of the city like this..."

They continued their stealthy pursuit, feeling gloomy.

But just then, they witnessed something unexpected. Just a bit ahead, the Black Rider slowed down and pulled over to the entrance of a rather quiet, secluded park. She checked something on the laptop again, then headed into the green space.

There was a man sitting on a bench there, who watched as the courier approached and showed him a cell phone or some other device.

Is he another member of that casino? they wondered, just as they noticed something else.

Hanging off the handlebar of the motorcycle was the bag that held the laptop, completely unattended. The courier must have assumed that the conversation would only take a second.

"...!"

It was the best opportunity the dealers could have hoped for. They sidled

up to the motorcycle, reached out the window of their car, and quietly lifted the bag off the handlebar.

Yes! And the courier hasn't noticed yet!

They were ready to roll quietly away and vanish before anyone noticed their crime, except...

Hhhhrreeeeeeeeeeee!!

The black motorcycle produced a sound like an enormous horse bellowing and lifted its front half into a wheelie, despite the lack of anyone riding it.

“Wh-wh-what the—?!”

Even more shocking, the bike's outline was writhing and shifting like smoke, morphing into the form of a giant horse without a head.

“An anti-theft...? No, what the fuck *is* that?!”

“Muh-mon...mons, monstaaaah! Whaaaaa—?! Aaaaah!”

At the sound of the beast's whinnying, the courier spun around and came rushing back from the bench.

“F-f-f-fuh-fuh! Floor it!” stammered the man in the passenger seat. It took him so long to get the words out that the driver already had his foot jammed onto the pedal.

They achieved their goal. They had the courier's laptop. The only thing left to do was get away, they told themselves, teeth chattering. They raced for the thoroughfare ahead.

In the rearview mirror, the courier was bearing down on them.

“Aaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaah!”

They drove.

Drove, raced, sped.

The car's engine rotated fit to burst into flame as they peeled away without a thought for potential accidents, obstacles, or anything that wasn't putting as much distance as possible between them and the Black Rider.

Once on the main road, they sped significantly over the speed limit before darting down one side street, then another, desperate to escape. After turning the third corner, the driver looked into the mirror—and saw nothing behind them. After the fourth, they were back on the main road, part of an endless flow of vehicles, where the passenger had time to scan the area.

The Black Rider was nowhere to be seen. The only disturbance was from the car behind them, which honked at their forceful merge into the lane.

All was normal.

It was exactly what you'd expect to see in the city. No room for monsters here.

In a daze of half disbelief, they set to check on the laptop in the bag. The man in the passenger seat got out his phone to let Shijima know.

"Thanks. Bring me the laptop at once. Kumoi will be slightly pleased with this."

Despite the clipped nature of his statement, he sounded a bit reassured about it, but that was nothing compared with the relief of the dealers.

Once their pulses returned to normal levels, they shared a look.

They had escaped.

From there, we head forward, to a dark place.



Tokyo, out-of-business bar

"Heaven's...Slave!"

Somewhere in Tokyo, inside an establishment that had once been a bar, Earthworm's eyes went wide upon hearing the introduction from the man named Shijima.

She'd just been about to torture the info dealer to get the information she wanted about this group—so why were they here all of a sudden? She'd never heard that they were allies of Izaya Orihara's, but maybe that was just a sign of her own lack of understanding. If it was true, this was a perilous situation.

Just as Earthworm began to wonder if she could use the man with the burlap sack over his head as a hostage, Shijima proved that to be unnecessary.

“Ah, is that the info broker the Awakusu-kai hired to give them info on you...Izaya Orihara?” he said with a brief glance at the imprisoned man.

Hesitantly, Earthworm replied, “You...don’t know him?”

“Hardly. Although we did utilize him to discover this location.”

He snapped his fingers, and a man came through the door with a laptop, which he placed on the counter so that everyone could see the screen. There was a map on it, with a horde of red dots arrayed all over the diagram.

“This is the program that displays the locations of the transmitters embedded in all your chips. Although I admit I don’t know what sort of system you’re using yet.”

It was the Amphisbaena chip-management program.

“...! How did you...?!” Earthworm gaped.

Shijima shrugged. “How, indeed? And how did we decipher the signals being sent by the chips? You’ll have a better answer from *him* than me, I suspect.”

“...The info dealer?”

“He gave the Black Rider this laptop to do his snooping around for him,” Shijima said, glancing at the tied-up man with an oddly happy smile on his lips.

For her part, Earthworm stared at the bound man in shock. “I had no idea he knew that much... So does that mean he knew the location of this hideout a long time ago?”

“Who can say except for him? All I know is that we were following him around, he went into a building, and a group of your people came back out. They were carrying a very large suitcase, big enough to hold a grown man. And the funny thing is, one of the red dots on this map was moving along with them.”

Shijima approached the seated man and began to feel around in his pockets. On the third try, he found and removed a single casino chip.

“See? Here it is. He had one, too.”

“...I guess we can chalk that one up to our people for not properly searching him first,” Earthworm said, glaring at her companions. They turned to one another and began the process of deflecting responsibility.

Shijima watched the distress among the group and asked, “So, are you the leader of Amphisbaena?”

“...No. The real owner hardly ever shows up among us. I don’t know where he is.”

“That’s a clever way of doing it. Our leader is rather similar. But we’ll have plenty of time to talk about that later, once we’ve gotten rid of this info dealer,” Shijima said, resting a hand on the head of the man under the burlap sack. “We figured that we were going to abduct him and do it ourselves, but now you’ve saved us the trouble. I guess there was no need to send anyone after his sisters after all.”

“...? You were after his sisters, too?”

“What? You too?” Shijima looked a bit surprised.

The caution never left Earthworm’s gaze. “I just gave the order about an hour ago to take them both, one at a time.”

“...Well, that’s a shame. We understand that the girls are dangerous on their own, so we sent some of our best after them. I’m not afraid of the two sides getting into a squabble...but I’d prefer if we didn’t draw the attention of the police. I suppose I’ll call my people off. We don’t need the hostages anyway.”

He pulled out his cell phone. “I hope you believe me when I say we’re not interested in being hostile with you. I came to discuss business...and I’d prefer to avoid the Awakusu-kai finding out about it. That’s all.”

As he spoke, he looked through the list to find the text addresses of his dealers who went to abduct Kururi and Mairu Orihara, but a ringtone filled the room before he could finish. It came not from Shijima’s phone but from one on the counter of the bar.

“...Is that me?” Earthworm wondered. It said the number was unlisted.

Who is it? Maybe...the owner?

She answered the phone, equal parts worry and excitement. “Hello...?”

“...”

The other end of the call was silent. Shijima was curious about this sudden call, too, his fingers still as he listened in.

But just then, he got a call, too, the vibration clear in the quiet room.

“...?”

His call was also from an unlisted number. With trepidation, he answered it.

What he heard was a woman saying, “Hello? Hello?” into her phone, right in front of him.

“...Huh?”

A shiver of cold air slid down his back. Earthworm looked abruptly toward him as she heard his grunt through the phone.

Neither of them understood what was happening. Then, after a few seconds, a third voice entered the call.

“Hey.”

“Who?” “...Who’s there?” they asked, Shijima and Earthworm hearing each other through the phone and the air.

The other person on the call announced in a clear, crisp voice, *“I’m glad the three-way call seems to be working. I’ve never tried it before.”*

“Who are you...?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. We haven’t spoken yet, have we? But you both know me pretty well, I’d say.”

“...No way.”

Both underbosses got the same nasty premonition.

And then, as though measuring the perfect amount of time for his payoff, the man on the phone introduced himself.

“Would you recognize the name...Izaya Orihara?”

Both of the listeners heard a rolling sound then, right near their eardrums. It was the sound of muscles tensing due to their jaws clenching.

Why now?

Why did he have their numbers?

But the situation was so bizarre, so unexpected, that they were both late to arrive on the most important question of all.

In unison, they turned their heads, ever so slowly, toward a single spot in the room.

To the man with the burlap sack over his head, who had been silent all day.

Again in unison, they wondered the exact same crucial question.

Then...

...who is he?



At that moment, Ikebukuro, office

“Huh? That’s weird...”

“What is it, Tanaka?” asked his coworker.

Tom Tanaka looked around and answered, “I’m supposed to be on the night shift with Shizuo and Vorona...but I don’t see Shizuo anywhere...”

Vorona was scanning the area right there with him, but there was no sign of the man in the distinctive bartender outfit anywhere in the office.

“He’d better not have gotten involved in more funny business.”



In a dark place

“You’ve both got rather extreme methods, wouldn’t you say? Abduction! Are we going to find out that you’ve been responsible for a number of missing detectives, too?” said the voice on the phone.

Earthworm hardly registered it.

Who...? If the man on the phone is Izaya Orihara, then...who’s under this sack?

She knew Izaya Orihara’s face from photos. It was this source that she’d been using to envision the face of the man under her care, enjoying his potential expressions. And now the entire basis for her actions had been overturned.

Numerous possibilities came and went inside her head, but they were all groundless fantasies that melded into the swirl of chaos, which, combined with the unexpected arrival of Heaven’s Slave, took her brain into a deep, dark place.

“...”

With her mind empty, Earthworm reached over to the burlap sack and placed her hand on the knotted drawstring. It was still tied tight.

“...I’m going to take this off. I mean it,” she muttered; it was unclear whether this was to the man underneath or herself. She made to simply rip the bag right off his head with the knot still tied tight. She stuck her fingers under

the opening around his neck and yanked the fabric upward.

In the space she opened, the hair hanging down the back of the man's neck *was black*.



Ikebukuro, office

“Hey. Sorry I’m late,” said Shizuo as he came through the door.

Tom exhaled and grumbled, “What happened, man? You’re never late like this.”

“Sorry. I had to help the boss with something.”

“Oh, I gotcha. Say no more.”

“What is the conduct of a duty contracted from the president?” wondered Vorona.

Tom exhaled harder this time. “It’s basically bodyguard work. Our boss has a number of enemies, see...but I can explain that all some other time.”

Relieved that Shizuo’s absence hadn’t been due to some unexpected trouble, Tom took his phone and headed for the door.

I’ll take peace and quiet over unpredictable excitement any day of the week, he thought, as he headed out to his notably violent job of collecting unpaid debts from deadbeats.

“Let’s just head out there and do a normal day’s work.”

“Gotcha.”

“I am understanding.”

...With two subordinates who were even more violent and dangerous than the job required in tow.



At that moment, Rakuei Gym

“Hey, where’s Eijirou?” asked a man with a squat silhouette, like a giant tree stump. But being squat did not mean he was actually short; in fact, he was reasonably tall, but that paled in comparison to his bulging armor of muscles like melded tires.

“Sir! Eijirou hasn’t been seen all afternoon!” said an apprentice.

“So he’s gone and run off again. The little bastard...,” said the muscled man, Eiichirou Sharaku—Eijirou’s brother. He exhaled a breath as massive as he was.

“And it’s one thing if he’s just ditching work... I just hope he’s not getting into some fight on the street again.”



In a dark place

Like Earthworm, Shijima was in a mild panic.

That isn’t Izaya Orihara?

As the woman desperately tried to rip the burlap sack off the seated man’s head, Shijima focused on the voice coming from the phone.

“So you’re Shijima, huh? It would’ve been more interesting if that Kumoi person had come.”

“...You know about Mr. Kumoi?”

“No, not really. Listen, I would’ve been happy not picking on you, but not only did you make an open attempt on my life, you also thought you could get my sisters involved. And that’s a problem for me.”

Shijima ground his teeth together.

How much does he know? And...more importantly, what should I do? Get away from here for now? Does he have his own cat’s paws in the room with us? If anything, I can’t even trust my own people anymore! Who’s the guy tied down? Is he with Izaya, too?!

If the man who was tied down started to struggle, would it be dangerous if they were here?

What if he was a police officer or Awakusu-kai yakuza? What if he saw their faces?

Out of these two possibilities, Shijima’s concerns about the former

gradually faded. The man sitting in the chair, judging by the state of his body, had little physical training. In fact, he seemed to have *no connection at all* to brute strength or martial arts.



At that moment, Tokyo, back alley

“...Man, this is the biggest pain in the ass I ever had. Look at this. Look at y’all. Buncha morons with no value but in numbers,” slurred Eijirou Sharaku, who stood in the midst of a crowd of about ten men, all knocked out.

At odds with the violent machismo of the scene, a bright and cheerful girl’s voice said, “Are you okay, Master? Are you hurt?”

“Course I ain’t. And shouldn’t that be my question to you?” he griped to Mairu, who giggled.

“But if it were just me, it really woulda been bad. These guys were super-tough!”

“You’re damn lucky I happened to be skippin’ work to wander around town and just happened to spot you and those morons followin’ you around.”

“Yeah, right. I bet you were keeping tabs on me. This morning, I talked about how some weird guys’ve been stalking me for days! And you’re just shy and humble enough not to admit what you were doing! Thanks for lookin’ out for me, Master! You sure you aren’t into little girls?!”

“Hey, where’d that last part come from?! That had nothing to do with your thanks!”

From a distance, another man watched the pair talk. He was of a different affiliation than the people who actually attempted to attack her—he was from the group selling Heaven’s Slave.

There was a bowgun in his hands, which he had trained right on Eijirou’s body.

You gotta be kidding me. I was gonna shoot her in the leg to make it easy to carry her away, and then this happens... Oh well, at least they’re alone now. I’ll get rid of the guy first.

He had no thought of giving up on the plan— in his mind, the best idea was to take the girl and blame it on the strange group that attacked them. The

bowgun was modified such that it was easily lethal if it struck the wrong spot. After witnessing the man's power in combat, the watcher pulled the trigger without a second thought.

But...

"Besides, Mairu... Whoa!" Eijirou yelped, twisting backward.

Something collided into the alley, the sound ringing out.

His right foot was extended high over his head. A second later, some kind of long object fell from above, rotating wildly. He snatched it out of the air and saw that it was a bowgun dart.

"..."

Without speaking, Eijirou picked up a stone from the ground at his feet, then hurled it at the bushes of the park just beyond the alleyway. The rock shot like a bullet right into the leaves.

"Buh—," came a brief shout, then the sound of something collapsing.

Satisfied that he'd hit his target, Eijirou rolled and cracked his neck. "If you're gonna try to sneak attack, you either gotta snipe from farther away or light my house on fire while I'm asleep. Am I right?"

"Y'know, you threw that rock really hard. If you hit him in the wrong spot, he might even be dead," noted Mairu, looking at the bush.

"I've been thinking," Eijirou said. "A martial artist needs to be ready at all times for all possibilities, so a sneak attack ain't exactly unfair...but if you flip that around, then anyone who tries to ambush a martial artist in public can't complain if they wind up dead, y'know? This ain't regulation competition."

"Hopefully, the police agree with you." Mairu grinned. Eijirou headed for the bushes, grumbling. While he went, Mairu's smile vanished, and she took out her phone.

She'd been on the way to see her sister, and this abrupt encounter made her worry that Kururi was under attack, too. Fortunately, she answered the phone immediately. Mairu warned her that it was dangerous and that she should wait in a crowded place.

Kururi's answer surprised her.

"Safe...already...done..." [It's all right, everything's done here.]

"Huh? What do you mean, it's done?"

“...Spooky... Saved... Me...” [The Headless Rider protected me.]



“...Thank... Thank...” [Thank you very much.]

Kururi bowed to the being standing across from her right after she hung up on Mairu. Her voice was tiny, barely audible.

Celty kindly typed, *“If you want to thank anyone, thank your brother.”*

“...Brother...?” [My brother?]

“He asked me to watch over you while your sister was safe at the dojo,” said Celty, who was standing in the midst of a group of unconscious men. They were all wearing protective goggles and masks, like survivalists—but only on their faces.

Most likely, they’d had advance warning that she carried a defensive spray with her. The strange thing was that a different group of men had attacked in the middle of the first one. They were smart enough to run right away.

Relieved that the girl was safe for now, Celty couldn’t help but wonder one thing.

Where is Izaya himself, and what is he doing now?



In a dark place

“Oh, this is quite enjoyable. I love hearing panic over the phone,” said the man on the call.

Shijima ground his teeth together even harder, and in as calm a voice as he could manage, he asked, “What do you want?”

“What do I want? Let’s see...is that Earthworm over there? Anyway, the Amphisbaena girl seems to have set down her phone, so could you make sure she’s holding it? We can’t continue without that.”

Shijima might as well have tsked his tongue in irritation. He approached the woman, who was still trying to rip off the burlap. “He wants you to get on the phone.”

“What...? What do I have to say to...? Ugh, forget this!”

She was clearly battling her own confusion. She kept tugging on the knot of the sack with her left hand and reached down to pick up the phone with her right.

“Hello, are you back on the call now? I can hear you breathing.”

“...I just...want to know...who this guy is!” Earthworm screamed, all her confidence and cockiness replaced with panic.

The delighted man on the other end of the call announced, *“It’s time for a quiz!”*

“Huh?”

“Is this a joke?”

“Question one. What do Lizard, the owner of Amphisbaena, and Kumoi from Heaven’s Slave have in common?”

Both Earthworm’s and Shijima’s hearts skipped a beat. It must have felt like they’d both been drenched in ice water, such was the chill the question caused to run over their skin.

“How do you know...the owner’s nickname is Lizard...?”

The quiz show MC on the phone ignored Earthworm. *“Bzzt! Out of time. The correct answer is they both have symmetrical moles under each eye! On to question two!”*

“How...how do you know...what the owner looks like?!”

“...”

While Earthworm stammered and failed, Shijima was pale and silent. No one else in the room understood what they were talking about; both Earthworm’s and Shijima’s subordinates were looking around in confusion.

“This question is about the man in the burlap sack. Do you suppose that under the sack, he’s got...moles on his face?”

“Huh...?”

“...!”

“And lastly, question three! What I want to know is, Who will we find under that sack—Lizard...or Kumoi...?”

Their brains shut off for just a single moment.

Earthworm didn’t want to know what the caller meant. But Shijima’s mind was consumed with a different kind of fear.

You’re kidding, right...? C-could Izaya Orihara really have taken Kumoi...? But if true, then that’s very bad news.

He recovered from his mental paralysis and instantly found his mind

flooded by a number of different thoughts that pushed him into immediate action.

“That’s a lie...a dirty lie! The owner... It can’t be the owner!” Earthworm wailed, clutching her head and crouching as she remembered all the things she’d done to the man before her.

Shijima stepped between them, and feigning internal calm, he said, “This is pointless. I’ll cut the knot open.”

He removed a small knife and slowly, slowly brought it toward the man’s neck. But then...

...the arm with which he held the knife suddenly stopped moving—as it was held *in the grip of the man in the burlap sack*.

“Huh...?”

“Wha...?”

His hands should’ve been tied behind his back, but now they were free. And not only was his left hand firmly on Shijima’s arm but the right was holding his own knife, out of nowhere.

“What were you going to try just now...?” the man taunted, holding up the knife to his own neck and carefully inserting it into the gap between his skin and the fabric.

With a few popping and ripping noises, the knot flew open, along with a corner of the sack mouth. He then folded his knife and slowly pulled off the kerosene-soaked fabric.

What emerged was *a smile*.

It was not a smile of derision, or of loving friendship, or of delight; nor was it creepy or pleasant. It almost seemed intended to be impossible to interpret.

“Hi,” said the smile.

But Earthworm and Shijima knew that this was no true smile; it had another proper name. But their knowledge surpassed the chaos and confusion in their minds and dragged them down into total darkness.

“Or should I say, it’s nice to meet you?”

“Izaya...” “Orihara...?” they said one after the other.

It was none other than the same Izaya Orihara they'd seen in so many photos.

So who was on the phone, then?

And why was he here?

And why was he laughing?

Mysteries, mysteries, mysteries.

A cavalcade of inexplicable phenomena assaulted Shijima, who'd only just recently arrived. But Earthworm had been here with him all along, and now she looked ready to cry. "Owner...help me?" she whined.

"Now, I'll admit I wasn't expecting to have kerosene dumped on me. Oh, and since you asked, unlike paint thinner, you can't get high off this stuff."

"Huh?"

"Ah yes, I suppose I have some questions to answer. As for whether people are essentially self-interested or put priority on others...the clichéd answer is 'It depends on the person.' And that's the fun part, that every case is different. Is human nature good or evil? Will reason or desire triumph? Will hope or despair win out in the end? The thing that makes humanity fun is that there's no single answer."



<https://mp4directs.com>

That was Izaya Orihara's answer, inexplicable smile on his lips, to the quiet questions Earthworm had asked him minutes earlier.

"Oh, and as for the lethal level of water, it's somewhere between ten and thirty liters. It depends on the person's weight, so for Kururi and Mairu, even less than ten liters could be pretty dangerous."

"..."

"As for the connection between Mikage Sharaku and me, I guess I would call her one of my old groupies. You'd have to ask Mikage what it all meant to her. I got her involved in a bit of an incident back then, which ended up with her leaving high school...so I suppose she might still hate my guts."

"..."

From the moment he removed the hood, Izaya's and Earthworm's positions had completely switched. Now it was the man doing all the talking and the woman unable to speak. The fact that he was responding to everything that had happened in the room today was sure proof that he was the very man who'd been wearing the sack the entire time.

"...H-huh? The...info dealer...?"

"Oh, you can speak again? I'll admit, your idea of torture was quite entertaining. I was expecting you to pull all my fingernails out, but you really didn't want to physically hurt me."

"...Uh...ah."

"How was it? I know I didn't scream at all for you. Is my voice the way you imagined it? You were enjoying imagining my face underneath that sack, but I don't need imagination. I'm enjoying the reality of the situation, the outcome... I love that stupid look on your face, for example. Oh, but when I say *love*, I don't mean I actually love you personally. Just to make that clear."

Then Earthworm recognized at last that the voice she heard over the phone and the voice of the man speaking to her in person were completely different.

"Oh...uh...then...who's on the phone...?" she mumbled, looking back and forth between the phone in her hand and Izaya. The voice on the other end of the line broke into a crude laugh that was nothing like the way it had been speaking before this.

"Ha-ha...! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hey, did you give away the game already, you piece of shit?! Fine, whatever! Here's question four! Who...am...I?"

At that moment, the door to the bar opened to reveal a man with a phone pressed to his ear. The right half of his face had a horrible burn scar, and the

eyes behind his sunglasses glinted with malice.

A number of men appeared behind him, wearing riding jackets with bone patterns on them, making the reasonably spacious bar feel even more crowded. The last of them was a muscular woman with spiked hair, but by this point, Earthworm had lost all interest.

“What...the hell...? Who are these people...?”

Shijima’s companions were overwhelmed, too, huddled in a corner of the bar, so that there was a tense three-way standoff developing. But a proper standoff would be better balanced between the factions. Izaya and his third party had the reins; both Amphisbaena and Heaven’s Slave were clearly intimidated.

What orders to give? Unlike Shijima and Earthworm, who were feverishly thinking about their next step, Izaya seemed unconcerned with any change in the situation.

“Let’s see, what else did you ask me?” he wondered. “Oh yes! As far as my weight and height go, you don’t think insurance company info is that easy to get your hands on, do you? You’re not Tsukumoya here. And even if you tried to hire him, I doubt he’d accept your offer.”

“...”

“And those numbers? *I simply gave you my own height and weight.* I take care of my health, you see. I always weigh myself after a shower.”

“...Wha—?”

Just stop it, Earthworm wanted to shriek, but her brain was in such chaos that she could barely even breathe, much less work her tongue.

“You...gave me...your...what? Huh?” she mumbled, practically sleep-talking.

Izaya chuckled and asked her, “Did that Informant B you hired, the one whose name or look you didn’t reveal...happen to go by the username Chrome?”

“How. Did. You...?”

“Listen, that was me.”

“...? ...Huh?”

He put a hand to Earthworm’s cheek and spoke to her, slow and gentle, like to a puppy. “The truth is, I was aware of you before the Awakusu-kai hired me. You made contact with an online info dealer that I operate under a different name.”

“You’re joking...”

“I’m not. In fact, it made me laugh that you came to hire my services while I was working the job for the Awakusu-kai. When I saw ‘I want information on Izaya Orihara,’ I had my first real belly laugh in ages. I almost thought I was going to rip open my stab wound from this spring,” he said, rubbing at his side.

Then something in his smile changed. It was more wicked now, clearly plotting.

“So I realized something while I was working with you.”

“No... Stop...”

“It kind of seems like your group’s ‘owner,’ as you call him, *hasn’t made contact with you in quite some time*, has he? Perhaps he’s actually abandoned you...”

“Stop it!” she bellowed, bringing the low background hum of conversation to a halt. “Kill...him...”

“Oh?”

“Hurry! Someone do it, anyone! Just kill him and get him out of my sight!” she shrieked to her companions in the back of the bar.

Right on cue, Shijima sent a meaningful look at his companions. He jutted his chin at the spiky-haired woman in Izaya’s crew, a silent signal to take her hostage.

About a half-dozen men perfectly interpreted his gesture and rushed upon the woman.

Bjurnk.

It was like the sound of a cardboard box being stomped on.

“...That wasn’t even a sneak attack, you guys,” said Mikage Sharaku, the spiky-haired woman in question. She looked practically bored.

She’d spun in place and slammed an elbow directly into the nose of the first man to reach her, who’d grabbed her collar.

“Haaah?!”

The other men faltered, alarmed by the sight of their buddy gushing blood from his shattered nose. In the next instant, Mikage’s toe slammed into the temple of one of them. It was a one-legged high kick at maximum power, and the steel-plated toe of her safety shoe knocked him unconscious before he even had time to scream.

Then, without lowering her leg, she bent her knee, and with perfect balance, she rammed her toes into the neck of another man. She didn't break the skin, but it did make a disgusting sound, propelling air out of his nose and mouth. His eyes rolled upward, and gravity pulled him down to the ground.

“...”

Mikage lowered her leg, glared at the remaining Heaven's Slave dealers, and then gave them a beckoning gesture with her hand.

Nearby, the members of Dragon Zombie watched without much concern. Clearly, they understood that she didn't need any assistance.

“Who the hell is she...?” Shijima muttered as Mikage continued to kick ass.

Izaya shrugged. “That's Mikage, the girl who popped up in the conversation a minute ago. So, where were we...?”

He started to say something but was drowned out by the sound of breaking glass behind him. Izaya spun around to see Earthworm holding a broken bottle in each hand, glaring at him with a look of madness.

“What...is your deal...? Why did you do...such a preposterous thing...?! Why would you go to the trouble of pretending to be kidnapped...just to get here...?”

“This is lovely. You're much more natural in this mood than when you were putting on that terrible wheedling voice earlier.”

“Answer the question!”

“Very well. I suppose I'd say it's a similar purpose as to what Shijima over there said.”

Shijima flinched at the unexpected mention of his name. But Izaya ignored him, hoisted himself up to sit on the bar, and began to explain.

“I could have just contacted the Awakusu-kai, told them about this location, and had *them* shut it down. But it would seem a bit mean to let those big bad men have their way with you helpless youngsters, wouldn't it? So I came here in an attempt to convince you to stop running your illegal casino, I suppose. You see, *I'm not your enemy.*”

“...?”

“As for the rest of it, I was engaging in some human observation. You can actually see out of that bag pretty well. It seemed like a rare opportunity to glimpse the adorable face of an amateur torturer. So I let you capture me, expecting that some finger bones and nails would be a worthwhile price to

pay for that. Pretty simple, really.”

Earthworm’s features twisted at the nonchalance in his voice, and she turned to her group, bottles brandished. “What are you doing?! Hurry up and...,” she started before her voice trailed off, “...kill...him...?”

She fell completely silent once she noticed the state of her companions.
“?”

Shijima followed her lead and glanced at the members of Amphisbaena—and like Earthworm, he, too, stiffened on the spot.

Izaya kicked his dangling legs as he sat on the bar counter. “Do you know how I was able to get here unharmed? Without a single punch or kick? As well as how I was able to get out of the ropes tying my hands back?”

“...What’s going on here?”

“I bet you don’t. In fact, I don’t think you’ll even believe me if I explain it to you.” He smirked and looked toward the back of the room to see for himself.

All the members of Amphisbaena had the deep-red color of blood where their eyes should have been white. They all stood there—eyes crimson, faint smiles on their lips, and totally still.

“The truth is, I’d have been happy to take my time and allow your subordinates to betray you, but with this Heaven’s Slave stuff, there wasn’t enough time. So I cheated a little. For that matter, the Black Rider is kind of like cheating, too.”

The mention of the Black Rider brought a glimmer to Shijima’s mind.

No way. Did he...intentionally get us to steal the laptop...? In order to lure us...no, to lure me here?

But his suspicions vanished in the face of the red-eyed group. He assumed they were under the influence of some kind of drug; the idea that it was some supernatural phenomenon was beyond his imagining at the moment.

Earthworm was under a similar impression. She spun back to the info broker, clutching her broken bottles. “Izaya Orihara...what have you done to my subordinates?”

“What did I tell you? *You aren’t going to believe my answer,*” he replied.

She leaped at him, as though that response alone were good enough reason to kill him. The propulsion of her jump was explosive. In fact, the speed of it surpassed the range of almost everyone present. Even Mikage, who was still fighting near the entrance, stopped in her tracks for a moment

and uttered a note of impressed surprise.

Without losing an ounce of momentum, the torturer thrust the deadly weapon in her right hand at Izaya's throat, intent on proving that she was more than met the eye. With a little flick of the wrist, she'd easily be able to sever his carotid artery.

But at the last possible instant, Izaya dodged out of the way and toppled back behind the counter. She raced around the bar, but he was already gone.

"Where did you go?!" she bellowed.

Yet now he was somehow on the outside of the bar counter. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Gosh, I'm not sure what to do. I don't like hitting girls."

"That's very funny, Izaya Orihara! You want to play the chivalrous gentleman now, after all of this...? I suppose you'd be happy to let me kill you, then!"

"I don't think the chivalrous label really fits in this case. And I certainly would prefer not to be murdered." He chuckled.

With superhuman agility, she leaped up on top of the counter, ready to jump on him.

"Instead, *I'll let my friend handle this*," he said, right as a shock ran through her knee.

"...?!?!"

Something in her body broke. She lost all sensation below the knee and toppled to the counter.

"~~~~~! ...!"

She couldn't even breathe due to the pain radiating from her knee to her entire body, much less scream or speak. The bottles fell from her hands all the way to the floor, where they shattered loudly.

Through the terrible impact of the pain, Earthworm tried to jolt her brain into motion, to make it tell her what happened. The answer came to her not through her logical mind but through her eyes and ears.

"You just scored a zero on that quiz, didn't cha?"

Resting his elbows on the counter right in front of her was a man whose voice she recognized. It was the man who'd pretended to be Izaya on the phone.

"Which means it's time for the pretty young lady to undergo our very entertaining penalty round."

"Rgh...aaau... Son of a... Fuck," she swore, all thoughts of ladylike

behavior gone. She glared at him through the pain. Right on cue, the man with the sunglasses and the burn scar on his face swung down his rubber-coated hammer onto her fingertip.

“.....!!!”

Coincidentally, the location where he crushed her finger was the exact same spot she had smashed on her enemies in the past. Her own blood ran over the old stain.

She screamed, and Ran Izumii, the man in the sunglasses, shoved a piece of cloth into her open mouth.

“*Mrruh!*”

Instantly, Earthworm understood what the fabric was. The rough texture against her tongue and the nose-stinging odor of oil told her it was the burlap sack over Izaya’s head just minutes ago.

“Happyyyyy birthdaaaay!” Izumii jeered, pulling out a lighter—and sure enough, he immediately set the fabric in Earthworm’s mouth ablaze.

A few dozen seconds later...

Earthworm was at Izumii’s feet, covered in agonizing wounds. She’d rolled off the counter onto the floor to put out the flaming fabric stuffed in her mouth. That part of the plan succeeded, but she wasn’t thinking about the minefield of broken glass on the floor. Her unharmed knee fell prey to Izumii’s hammer next, and the pain of all this knocked her completely unconscious.

“Ha-ha... Y’know, this reminds me of the old days. Don’t it?” Izumii cackled madly, rolling the woman over with his foot. “Hey, she’s pretty hot when you get a good look at her.”

And despite the huge crowd present in the room, he reached out for her clothes, and...

“Knock it off, Izumii,” warned Mikage, bringing him up short.

“What the hell? Why you stoppin’ me? She’s a sicko; she’s tortured multiple people,” he complained.

“Yeah, so I’m not going to stop you if you smash her face with that hammer or burn her alive,” Mikage said without batting an eye. “But if you’re going to defile her as a woman...it’ll be my turn to hurt you, Izumii.”

He clicked his tongue in obvious disgust and dropped his hand to his side.

“I don’t gotta follow your orders...but I suppose you can owe me one.

You're gonna make up the favor to me yourself, right? Huh?"

"Go ahead, assuming you can get the best of me," she retorted, murder in her voice.

He clicked his tongue again and left the room, leering.

Having watched the scene in stunned disbelief, Shijima was relieved that at least one of the more dangerous individuals was gone. But it also imparted a terrible truth to him: All his Heaven's Slave friends who'd attacked Mikage were wiped out.

What is this? What...am I watching happen?

There was only one thing he knew for sure: At this moment, he had not a single ally in the bar who was capable of helping him.

Izaya Orihara approached him and whispered into his ear, "Hi. You capable of talking yet?"

"..."

"By the way...when I was wearing the sack earlier, you tried to *stab me*, didn't you?"

"...!"

Shijima flinched and spun around despite himself. All his people were either knocked out by Mikage or groaning on the floor, unable to stand. They wouldn't be able to hear Izaya's whisper.

"It's all right. I'm not going to reveal that to your friends. Very bold of you, though. It takes real guts to assume that it's Kumoi under the sack and go in for the kill."



<https://mp4directs.com>

“...”

“My assumption about you and Kumoi was right, it seems,” Izaya crowed.

Shijima felt the sweat running through his clenched palm. “What...are you going to do with me?”

Izaya replied to the young man’s question by glancing at Earthworm first, then saying, “If you want, you and your people can stop getting into mischief that draws the attention of the Awakusu-kai, then give yourself up to join the Dollars. I can set you up with them.

“With the Dollars’ information network...you might even be able to learn the location of the missing Amphisbaena owner and your Kumoi.”



“Very clever of you to pull the grandson of a powerful man into the group,” said a woman outside the entrance to the bar, when Izaya stepped through it.

“I wasn’t trying to get access to an influential figure. He was just a little bonus I received for taking the Awakusu-kai’s contract,” he told the long-haired woman.

Haruna Niekawa smiled and said, “So what should I do now?”

“I have a feeling I won’t find any success trying to convince that Earthworm girl. Would you give it a shot for me?”

Haruna smiled and smiled and smiled, her eyes sparkling. For some reason, there was a bandage wrapped around her neck. “If I do as you say, will you really let me see Takashi?”

“Whether you can or not depends on you. All I do is give you the information.”

“Hmm...”

The next moment, there was a sharp metallic sound between the two. Izaya had his knife free, which he’d used to block Haruna’s own knife lunge.

“...Too bad. I figured that if I could control you, I’d know Takashi’s location right away.”

“The thing is, I love human beings. I’m not interested in the least in being under the control of some inhuman monstrous thing.”

“Says the man who’s making use of a monster,” she retorted.

He shrugged. “You’re right. It’s half against my better judgment. But I’ve made use of the dullahan for so many things already, I had to draw the line there. I won’t use your power unless absolutely necessary, and in this case, things were going to get very, very messy without you.”

He paused, then admitted, “Actually, I respect you as a human being. You’re not like Anri Sonohara, who completely accepted Saika and gave up on being human. You conquered Saika through your own power and rule her as a human.”

“My Saika is a weak thing compared with that little thief,” she said, grinning as her head inclined to the side. “And...it wasn’t my own power. It was the power of my love for Takashi.”

Izaya smiled back at her, waved, then turned away.

“Have no concern. Your Saika power might be weaker than Anri Sonohara’s, but that’s what makes you stronger.”

“You’ve beaten Saika’s stranglehold on you twice now.”



Several days later, Tokyo, in a luxury sedan

“...So it turned out that Amphisbaena had already effectively ceased activity. The club owner nicknamed Lizard was already long gone by the time I started looking into him. I’m sure he’s far away by now. I have no doubt that the usual customers at the gambling rings you oversee will be returning shortly,” Izaya proudly declared, sitting on the left side of the backseat.

In his usual way, Shiki said, “And you don’t know the whereabouts of anyone aside from the leader?”

“I did look into it, but the majority of them were ordinary civilians. I doubt we’d learn anything from talking to them, and given the fact that the group is inactive, what’s the use of putting the screws on them?”

“That’s for us to decide...but fine. If they start up again, you’re going to give us the full list for free.”

“Certainly. And since I didn’t manage to track down their leader, I don’t need any follow-up payment. Just the up-front money will do,” Izaya said, shrugging sadly.

“By the way, about those college student dealers...,” Shiki began, “they’ve been gone from the market for the last two days. Any thoughts about why that is?”

“Dunno. Maybe they fought it out with what’s left of Amphisbaena,” Izaya suggested gleefully.

Shiki grinned—and offered earnestly, “Info Broker...don’t assume the world will always work out in your favor.”

His words were delivered with a smile but as heavy and piercing as a bullet to the gut.

Unfazed, Izaya took the statement head-on and shot back, “Oh, please. It’s the fact that things don’t always go your way that makes the world fun.”

Shiki glanced at Izaya without changing the angle of his head and steepled his fingers. “You don’t think we’re totally ignorant, do you?”

“...”

Izaya said nothing, but Shiki didn’t push him any further on that point.

“So, getting back to business... Ah, right. Our Akabayashi wants to speak with you. You may contact him at a convenient time,” Shiki said, back in work mode.

Izaya replied, “Yes, I’ll get back to him soon.”

He grinned, then laughed sardonically.

“I make my living by being used by everyone I can.

“That’s what being an info dealer...no, what being Izaya Orihara means. That’s my bliss.”

EPILOGUE & NEXT PROLOGUE Me



Epilogue & Next Prologue: Me

Hi, Nakura. Nice work.

“...”

I was listening in with my earpiece. Very nice acting. You’re such an accomplished liar.

“You’ve made me do it so much, I can’t help but learn.”

I have to admit, your ad-lib about it being “clear at a glance that he’s abnormal” was an inspired choice.

“Was there a problem with that?”

No, not at all! It’s just that if you truly sensed I was abnormal, I don’t think you’d have let me use your name or enlist your help for this little act. It kind of made me laugh.

“Please, Izaya, don’t do this to me. That Kujiragi woman wasn’t from an insurance company, either, was she?! Just please, please, please don’t get me trapped in some kind of yakuza thing!”

Why, your skills of observation are first-rate now. You’re right, the part about her being an insurance salesperson was a complete lie. But her name actually is Kujiragi. Don’t worry; she’s not quite like a yakuza.

“R-really?”

Yes, really. If anything, you should be thanking me. You were nearly targeted by the Awakusu-kai from two directions.

“...Huh?”

Do you remember, back in senior year of high school...when you and I created that little group called Amphisbaena?

“Y-yeah...the one that was like an extension...of our old middle school baseball betting club. We created it in secret without anyone knowing our identities.”

Right, that’s the one. And you called yourself Lizard.

“But that shut down right away...”

Do you remember how one of the members was a girl who went by Earthworm?

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

Of course not. Even I didn’t know about her. Either she was way on the bottom of the totem pole, or she participated in the betting and fantasized about being a member of the group.

“So what about this Earthworm girl?”

She took over the Amphisbaena name and started messing around in the Awakusu-kai’s territory. And her gambling operation was way bigger than anything we built back then.

“...Huh?”

It was quite entertaining, really. Even though you—as Lizard—were gone from the scene years and years ago, she practically worshipped you. “Owner” this and “Owner” that.

“Wait, wait, hang on. What are you talking about?”

Somewhere in her brain, she must’ve thought she was your girlfriend and convinced all her followers of it, too. Claiming that only she could make contact with the club’s owner, and so on.

“I’m not seeing where this is fitting together!”

It’s fine; you don’t have to worry. It’s all been solved.

“It...it has?”

The most brilliant part of all, though...was that their sworn enemy...was Shijima.

“What?! Y-you mean...right after we graduated college, when we created that experimental underground club for legal drugs...*that* Shijima?”

Yep, Shijima the rich boy. I never showed my face for any of it, but you were kind of like the founder for his support group, using the alias Kumoi.

“Wh-what did he do now?”

He created an illegal drug instead of a legal one.

“...What?”

And he claimed that it was all on “Mr. Kumoi’s” orders.

“Wait! Wait, wait! Hold on! You can’t— That wasn’t me!”

That was a funny reaction. Are you sleepy?

“No, I’m not! Why is he using my alias like that?!”

Shijima’s a pretty clever guy, actually. He made himself the number two of the operation, and by undergoing some fictional punishment courtesy of Kumoi, he instilled fear in the other members. They were terrified of Kumoi.

“...”

But he was committed, man. He actually drilled holes in his front teeth

and scarred up his own arm with the pointer of a dart. At that point, it's really more like a kind of cultish belief system.

"I can't take this anymore. You gotta stop it! What should I do...? Please help me!"

What do you mean? I did help you. There's no cause to worry about Shijima anymore.

"Is that true...?"

Yeah. So you have nothing to fear.

Anyhow, with that out of the way, here's to a long and fruitful relationship.

"..."

And if it ends up being necessary...we can just have Shinra change your facial features again. After taking those moles on your cheeks off and tweaking your looks, I doubt that either Earthworm or Shijima would recognize you at this point.

"What should...what should I do?!"

You don't have to do anything.

"..."

If you regret any of this, complain to your past self. I'll call you again later.

"Uh, f-fine. So long."

Bye-bye.

"..."

"...Aaah.

"Aaaaaaah! Dammit, dammit, dammit!

"Why...why do I have to suffer through all this? Why?!"

"What the goddamn hell?! What did I do? What did I do to deserve...? Well, I guess...I did.

"Why...why did I have...to do that...?!"



Twelve years ago, last day of summer vacation, Raijin Middle School,

biology room

“So that’s why I think your baseball gambling is a bad idea.”

“Are you still going on about that? Give it a rest.”

How long had they been arguing about this? Izaya glared at his club president, obviously annoyed at his tenacity.

He’d agreed to come to the classroom to take care of the plants during the week of summer vacation for his own reasons. By having a quiet place to hang out regularly, he had the perfect location for running a baseball betting operation.

Students would come to the biology class, stating a desire to check out the carnivorous plants there. Almost all of them were just saying that as an excuse to come and visit the bookie, Izaya. Thanks to that cover, the operation lasted without teacher interference—until today, the last day of summer vacation, when the club president, Shinra Kishitani, happened to witness the betting in action and continued his persistent argument against Izaya’s plan.

Shinra Kishitani wasn’t making his argument out of a sense of righteousness. Izaya understood that, too.

It was more that he wanted to make himself *seem* like a righteous person, in order for his crush to find him worthy. This annoyed Izaya, who refused to stop his little pet project.

Shinra wasn’t emotional. He didn’t get angry or sad about it; he just kept making his arguments, ad nauseam.

“Are you stupid, Shinra? Or are you just some kind of puppet without his own free will, doing whatever your family wants you to do?”

“I’d happily be a puppet, if it meant I was connected to my beloved by a string.”

“This is a waste of my time.”

Truly annoyed now, Izaya refused to continue the conversation for a while. Eventually, the silence was broken not by Shinra or Izaya but by a third party who opened the door to the classroom.

“...Izaya?” mumbled the boy.

Shinra smiled and raised a hand. “Hi there, Nakura. Did you come to see our carnivorous plants?”

The boy with the little teardrop moles beneath his eyes ignored his classmate and walked up to Izaya.

“...What’s the matter? The book is closed for the day.”

That alone was enough to identify Nakura as a regular at the baseball betting desk. Shinra looked back and forth between the two, his expression betraying nothing.

“Hey...could you lend me some money? Pleaaase?” Nakura asked, his face empty and lips trembling.

“I don’t loan out money.”

“Then give back all the money I bet up to yesterday... I’m in trouble, man. My dad’s gonna find out I’ve been taking cash from his wallet if I don’t put it all back.”

“That’s your problem, not mine. I never once forced you to make a bet.” Izaya laughed coldly.

Nakura’s lips trembled again—and he yanked a little paring knife out of his pocket, holding it up with even more unsteady fingers.

“...Are you serious, Nakura?” Izaya asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Give it! I said give it here! Give... Gibback...my money!” Nakura yelled, his demand punctuated by the rattling of his teeth. He could barely pronounce the words; he probably didn’t even fully understand what he was saying. Either way, the boy moved closer to Izaya, step-by-step, the blade held out.

“Honestly, I can’t imagine there’s anything to gain by giving you that money back. I know you’ve been stalking people who actually won money with me. They’ve been complaining about you,” Izaya revealed.

Nakura raced toward him.

“Ju...just give it back! Give it...back!”

“You’re such an idiot,” Izaya said, just the barest hint of worry in his eyes, and he reached for a nearby chair to prepare for the attack.

Just when things seemed primed to explode, Shinra jumped in between the two.

“Waiggah!”

He was probably trying to say “Wait,” but Nakura neither slowed down nor stopped, even with the other boy in the way. And the impact against Shinra’s stomach turned his command into the word *waiggah*.

A side effect of the impact was the sudden introduction of blood to the biology room floor.

When Nakura saw the blood on the knife in his hand, his face went ghostly white.

“Uh...wha—? N-n-no—no—no, I...I was only... It was just a threat...to Izaya...,” Nakura stammered, his head shaking, unable to admit what he’d just done. “It wasn’t me— I didn’t— It’s not my— Aah, aaaaaaah!”

He dropped the knife and raced out of the room. Izaya rushed over to Shinra and saw the spot on his side where the knife hit him. The gash wasn’t so big that his innards would poke out, but there was a gush of blood that left a spreading red mark on Shinra’s clothes.

“Hang on, I’ll call for an ambulance,” Izaya said, pulling a cell phone from his bag—which was rare at the time—but Shinra grabbed his wrist.

“First...go to the storage closet...and get the...tape.”

“Huh?”

“...That will at least...stop the...bleeding.”

“...Right.”

For being stabbed in the gut, Shinra gave orders with easy familiarity. Izaya obeyed and got the tape.

Shinra used a special wrapping method to seal his gash, then smiled at Izaya. “Ha-ha. I guess being the hero doesn’t suit me, huh?”

“You probably shouldn’t talk right now.”

“I thought,” Shinra said shyly, “that if I became a hero...the one I love... might praise me...*urgh!*”

“Easy, man...”

“It’s all right. This isn’t going to be immediately fatal. My organs are all right, and miraculously enough, it didn’t breach the peritoneum...*urgh!*”

The sight of Shinra, pale-faced, brought a particular emotion to Izaya’s chest: jealousy.

He understood that he was meant to observe other human beings. He was always to be in a higher position than the people around him.

But unlike him, Shinra Kishitani truly was from a different dimension.

How many people could stand in the way of a rampaging knife not out of instinct, not out of a sense of heroism, but because they wanted to impress someone else? Love is blind, according to the saying, but in Shinra’s case, it was also insane.

It seemed that his moral core as a person came from a completely different place than all other human beings—including Izaya.

He was alarmed enough at this moment that he couldn’t accurately understand his emotions as it happened, but upon later reflection, Izaya decided that Shinra viewed humanity from a different dimension. But unlike

him, Shinra did not actually love human beings. And still, Izaya envied him.

A classmate who occupied a dimension separate from those around him, different from even Izaya. And it was this emotion that caused his finger to stop before it hit the button to call the hospital.

“...Hey, Shinra,” he said, addressing his wounded, groaning classmate with a thin smile. “Do you think...*we could say that I stabbed you?*”

“Ow-ow-ow... Huh?”

“And in return...I’ll spend my entire life making Nakura regret what he did.”



Twelve years later

“*And what did you say?*”

“Uh, I’m pretty certain I just said, ‘Yeah, sure,’” Shinra replied. He was still prone on the bed.

“*I can’t believe this,*” Celty typed, annoyed. “*You really were capable of truly dynamic actions, even as a child.*”

“Heh-heh. I just played the goody-goody honor student around you.”

“*Sorry, but you didn’t come off as an honor student, either.*”

“I didn’t?! *Urgh!*” he yelped, wincing as his broken bones creaked.

Celty hurriedly calmed him down and wiped the sweat from his neck.

The scar on his side was a stab wound from a classmate, which Izaya had taken the fall for, and ever since, he’d used the real culprit as his own cat’s paw.

That was the truth as Shinra had explained it, several days ago, but after further discussing the details today, she sensed that something still didn’t add up on Shinra’s side. The story sounded very appropriate for him, but on the other hand, something nagged at her.

“*And you were fine with that? It must’ve been hard to get along with the very classmate who stabbed you, like nothing ever happened.*”

“Actually, it wasn’t a big deal. I was never interested in him to begin with. But afterward, when I thought about it more, I was furious that he stabbed me. I thought it served him right that Izaya was using him for all he

was worth.”

“...I’m surprised you would feel that way.”

“Well, if I died from being stabbed...that would be one thing, but more importantly, I couldn’t see you again. So with that in mind, stabbing me is like trying to steal you from me. Of course, I can’t forgive that!” Shinra ranted.

Celty made another sighing motion with her shoulders and changed the topic to the payment for her recent job. She’d gone around collecting strange chips, intentionally allowed the laptop to get stolen, and protected Izaya’s sister from harm, and apparently, that was all that Izaya needed. He summoned her with a message that said the job had been completed safely.

Then he gave her a surprisingly hefty envelope of cash, along the information he owed her...

Jinnai Yodogiri.

Izaya claimed he was the plotter who sent that stalker after Shinra. It’s hard to believe...but I’ve never known him to be the type to lie in that context. And considering that this man was Ruri’s former agency president, the stalker angle does seem plausible.

...But what bothers me even more than that... What bothers me...is...

“What’s wrong, Celty?”

Shinra’s voice made her snap back to her senses.

“Er, it’s nothing,” she typed.

“Are you hiding something from me, Celty?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” she admitted. *“But I don’t want to tell you what it is.”*

“...That’s not fair, Celty. That leaves me with no options,” he said, screwing up his face like he was going to cry. Then he sighed and favored her with a smile. “It’s fine. I won’t force you to say. Oh, but just to be sure: It’s not that you’re cheating on me, right?”

“Don’t worry; it’s not that.”

“Oh, good. I’m not worrying, then. Wow, that bit of relief just made me feel sleepy... *Yawn...*”

He closed his eyes and steadily drifted off to sleep. She watched him nod off and felt her heart being constricted.

She hadn’t been worried about the bit of truth she received from Izaya as payment for her help. The problem was the powerful *presence* she felt in the moment she got that information.

It was an unforgettable sensation. *The presence of her own head.*

That's it, all right... Izaya has my head.

The woman from Yagiri Pharmaceuticals was on the run with her head. Given Izaya's abilities of information collection, it was very possible he'd already made contact with her and gotten the head.

That faint sensation she'd always felt around here was incredibly strong at the moment, sharper than she'd ever felt it. It was such a concern to her that she went back to their meeting spot a few hours later, but the sensation of her head was back to being as fuzzy as it had always been.

So it's possible Izaya had it there with him! But...for what purpose?

I can't trust him. But...if I tracked him down and demanded the head back...what would happen?

If her head returned, what would happen to her life and memories as they existed right now? Would it be like Shinra feared and cause her to forget about everything with him in Ikebukuro and compel her to return to her original duty as a dullahan, never to return to this life again?

That possibility made Celty more afraid to come into contact with her head than ever before. The only way to keep the fear under control was to gaze at Shinra's face.

Shinra.

She didn't find the answer she needed, but the sight of him brought deep relief to her conflicted heart.

When he got attacked, the level of her fury convinced her how irreplaceable he was to her—and her sense of relief now did much the same.

Celty was reminded of something she'd thought about before.

Was this the same emotion as what human beings called love? She didn't know. But she wanted it to be true. She hoped that she and Shinra could be connected by the same emotion.

And so, without a god to pray to, she prayed to the neighborhood of Ikebukuro instead.



Ikebukuro, on the street

“The courier didn’t say anything after all. I’m pretty sure she knew, though.”

“I know this is only the thousandth time I’ve said this, but...you really are the worst person in the world. I hate that Headless Rider...but in this one case, I feel some sympathy for her. In a sense, she wasn’t the one who seduced Seiji; it was just her head,” Namie said, her voice thin through the phone speaker.

Izaya rolled his head around and said, “At least the basis for your hatred is crystal clear. But in any case, I knew she wasn’t going to demand it back. My curiosity was toward any possible changes in the head...but there certainly wasn’t anything visible.”

“This is a joke. You profess to be a lover of humanity, and here you are looking for hope in the world after death.”

“No, just the opposite. My love for humanity means I want to keep watching it forever.”

“So you’re God now?” she snapped, exhausted.

He shrugged. “I said no such thing. I’m not trying to *do* anything with humanity. I just want to watch it. And in order to keep things interesting, to poke them just a little bit now and then.”

“An evil god, then. Perhaps Loki from the Norse myths?”

“First Mr. Shiki, now you. Is there a mythology trend these days?” he shot back.

After a few more similar barbs back and forth, Izaya finished the discussion of work and hung up the call. He walked down the street, recalling what Celty had said as they’d parted:

“I have to admit, my opinion of you has improved today. You asked me to protect your sister...so I suppose you’re still human enough that you’d worry about your own family members.”

He couldn’t tell if that was just a bit of flattery to hide her shock at sensing the head or if it was her true opinion. But either way, he had denied the allegation.

You’re wrong, courier. Absolutely off the mark.

The only reason I had you protect my sister...is because I didn’t want her ending up at that bar...where Haruna Niekawa was. That’s all.

As he strolled through Ikebukuro, Izaya let his mind wander.

To him, his sisters were essentially the same as anyone else, albeit often difficult for him to know how to handle. To Izaya Orihara personally, family members and strangers both essentially occupied the same category as

friends.

But then he remembered his middle school days, when Nakura stabbed Shinra—the very genesis of this entire string of events, in a way.

Now that I think about it...that might be the one single event that had a clear and undeniable effect on shaping who I am as a person.

He recalled the jealousy and inferiority he had felt when it happened and wondered if perhaps Shinra Kishitani was less of a friend to him than a rival. And rather than a target of hatred like Shizuo Heiwajima, might he actually be something Izaya should *strive* to be?

But then he thought of Shinra today and laughed. “No, of course not.”

Still, I can't deny that I was jealous of how firmly, confidently alien he was.

And now he was betraying that friend of his. A friend by the definition of the rest of the world, not Izaya's own twisted standards.

He'll be pissed if he finds out I brought the head very close to Celty.

“Ha-ha!” he chuckled, imagining the sight of the one actual friend he had consumed by rage.

Nothing to be afraid of.

That was how he'd always lived; he laughed—

and laughed—

and laughed—

and laughed—

—and clenched his right hand into a fist, then rammed it into a telephone pole.

The sound was violent, but there was no one else in the alley to hear it.

Whatever expression he made, whatever reason he clenched his fist, whatever he was thinking—no one in the entire world could know.

Because...

“Oh, there he is! Iza! Brother Izaaaa!”

“...Clan...” [Brother.]

“Oh? What's gotten into you two? It's rare for you to call out first before you attack me.”

When Izaya spun around at the sound of his sisters' voices, he wore the same smile he always did.

"I think better of you after today, Bro! You asked the Headless Rider to protect Kuru from harm?!"

"...Doubt..." [Is it true?]

"Oh, don't be so naive. I was doing something I didn't want the rider finding out about, so I utilized you to keep her out of my hair," he revealed.

But to his surprise, the girls looked at each other, then broke into smiles.

"That still works for us! Thanks, Iza!"

"...Gratitude..." [Thank you.]

"I swear, it's so difficult to tell what you're thinking."

"That's because you're never honest about your emotions."

They took sides, escorting Izaya down the road as he grimaced. On the right, Mairu looked up at her brother and commented, "Hey, Iza, you might treat us the way you would treat any other person, but we still think of you as family. So don't forget that, okay?"

"What's this? That's a very sweet thing to say," he said, glancing at his sister—she usually just attempted to jump kick him while screaming "Die!!"—but the girls wore the same innocent smiles they always did.

"So if Shizuo ever kills you, we'll shed a few tears before we celebrate!"

"Minuscule..." [Just a few.]

"...I was a fool for expecting familial love from you." He chuckled and strode ahead of them.

Mairu noticed his right hand and wondered, "Iza, is your hand swollen?"

"...Health?" [Are you all right?]

He laid his left hand on Kururi's worried head and lied, "Yeah, I was getting chased around by Shizu. That's when it happened."

"Ohhh. So you earned it."

"You girls should stay away from that muscle-bound monster, too. You'll end up dead."

And thus they vanished into the night.

The city welcomed and accepted everything—such that their words melted into the background thrum, just as if they were having a normal family conversation.



The next day, Ikebukuro, Russia Sushi

“It’s been so peaceful lately.”

Yumasaki was sitting at the counter, waiting for his sushi.

Next to him was Togusa, who raged, “It hasn’t been peaceful at all! They arrested someone who was trying to set fire to Ruri’s friend’s house... What a terrible world!”

“Yeah, but they caught ’em. So it’s all right.”

“They didn’t catch Adabashi, the piece of shit who was behind it all! Dammit... If I just had a headshot to go off, I’d take my van all over the city looking for him so I could feed him to my tires!”

“Calm down, Togusa,” said Kadota, sipping his hot tea.

Simon looked up from cleaning the back counter and said, “What this? Karisawa is on vacation? Did she catch sick? You catch sick, you need stamina. You buy sushi souvenir to take her, very good.”

“No, she’s just having a meeting with some of her cosplay girlfriends today. I’m feeling pretty lonely because I have no one to talk manga with,” Yumasaki lamented.

“Oh, you sigh, all happiness escape through mouth,” Simon said sagely. “Where is escaped happiness? Rumor says inside salmon roe. You order ikura. Apart from Karisawa, but your hearts together. Stomach is full, heart is full. Three of you eat four portions. Battle to avenge Karisawa.”

“Avenge her? Listen, Simon,” Kadota started, about to correct his use of language, when the door of the restaurant opened and ushered in a new customer.

“Welcome to Russ... Oh! Long time no see, boss!” greeted Simon happily. Kadota’s group was shocked, however—and Denis, the head chef, addressed both the new customer and the seated group at the same time.

“There’s a table open in the tatami area. You want to move back there?”

The new customer bowed to Kadota and said, “Do you mind?”

“Kida...”

“Sorry. I spotted you guys coming in here...and I was hoping we could talk.”

“Uh, sure, if you want...”

Two things surprised Kadota. One was that Masaomi Kida was back in town.

The other was that he was wearing a bright-yellow scarf around his neck.



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Ikebukuro

By the time Anri Sonohara left the Junkudo bookstore, the sun was descending toward the horizon. She headed back home, bookstore bag stuffed with cookbooks for beginners. She didn't have any particular goals to achieve during the vacation, but her heart was singing all the same.

Kida's back in town. It might only be for the moment...but he seems to be doing well.

During the recent uproar with the stalker, Masaomi Kida had saved the kitten Anri was cat sitting. She didn't know why he was there, and ultimately, he ran off without speaking much.

But still, it made her happy. Mikado would be delighted when he found out, too. He'd been acting strangely in recent days, and perhaps Masaomi's presence would make him return to normal, she hoped.

But there had been no progress since then. Still, Masaomi's promise that he would come back to them was her bedrock. And there were two things she needed to do to prepare for the inevitable moment that Masaomi returned for good, and the three of them went back to being friends like before.

One was that she wanted to be able to cook for the two boys.

And the other was that she wanted absolute control over Saika.

They were two completely different goals, so she decided to start by buying some beginner cookbooks. As for the other goal, she had no idea how to even begin. At this very moment, like all other times, Saika was whispering words of love under her skin.

She held the voices at bay, keeping them within the picture frame of her mind as she hiked the path home, when a voice over her shoulder made her stop.

"Oh! It's Anri! Heyyy!"

There were two women standing there. One was unfamiliar, but the other she recognized: Erika Karisawa.

"Good evening, Karisawa," she said, her expression and mind softening. Karisawa had seen her when she allowed Saika to surface but still interacted with Anri the same as before, which made her a very precious friend indeed.

“You were at Junkudo? Ooh, what’d you get? Manga?”

“No, just some cookbooks... Oh, er...,” she stammered, noticing the other girl suddenly.

Karisawa laughed and said, “Oh, this is Azusa Tsutsugawa. She’s a cosplay friend of mine. Sometimes she rides around in Togusa’s van, too, so it’s good for you to know her.”

“Oh, I see! Um, my name is Anri Sonohara. It’s nice to meet you...”

“Don’t worry—you don’t have to get all stuffy with me,” said the girl, who dressed femme but talked like a tomboy. “I’m Azusa Tsutsugawa. Nice to meetcha!”

Anri dipped her head again, slightly taken aback, then asked Karisawa, “You aren’t hanging out with Yumasaki and the whole group today?”

“No, we just had a little meeting for our cosplay group. Actually, this is perfect timing! There was something I’ve been meaning to tell you, Anri.”

“?”

Karisawa’s eyes sparkled with excitement. She didn’t realize that what she was about to say would change the fate of the girl she was speaking to.

“Hey, Anri...do you want to try cosplay? You really should do it!”

“...Huh?”

Anri was even more confused by the question than the lead-up, so Karisawa explained.

“It doesn’t even have to be an anime character! We can start with something easy, like a maid outfit or a miko shrine maiden!”



Night, West Ikebukuro Park

With no earthly idea that the girl he once cared for was in danger of being dressed up as a miko, Akabayashi of the Awakusu-kai met with a client.

It was long after all the children had gone home, so Akabayashi sat in the empty swing and handed an envelope to the information dealer he was with.

“It’s really no big job. It’s just a bother for a guy like me to go sniffing around the civvies, if you know what I mean.”

Izaya Orihara took the envelope with the same smile he always wore and

said, "I'm a bit surprised. I thought you distrusted me, Mr. Akabayashi."

"Oh, I do. About as much as one can. I happen to think you're probably working with the Asuki-gumi, among others. Am I right?" His posture in the swing was totally still.

"Would that be a problem? The Asuki-gumi are part of the same Medei syndicate, aren't they? And the answer is no, I'm not."

"Surely you understand that it's not as simple as that."

Izaya grinned at him and pulled a photograph out of the envelope. The instant he saw it, the nature of his smile changed subtly.

Akabayashi's left eye didn't miss that. "You reacted. You know him?"

"He's from the school I went to. What did he do?"

"Well, the daughter of someone who once did me a great favor has been seen walkin' around town with this kid...and the stories I hear suggest he's part of one o' them street gangs. Now, I ain't the type to interfere in young romance, but I can't help but be curious if the boy's got himself involved in something shady," Akabayashi explained, watching him carefully.

Izaya's hackles rose. *Akabayashi...an inscrutable man. Is this job meant to measure who I am as a person...?*

On the inside, Izaya wore a confident smile, and on the outside, his usual expression. "All right. If he's involved in anything strange, I will convince him to stop."

"Thanks. I figured that hiring an info broker closer to his age would be a safer bet than a private eye. And the girl's parents, the folks I owe a great debt, they're in heaven now. I'd feel terrible to them if anything happened to her," Akabayashi said in the manner of small talk.

"Are you sure the father's in heaven?" Izaya dared to ask.

"Ha-ha-ha, you really are an info broker. I suppose you'd have to know things like that."

He was referring to the fact that the girl Akabayashi mentioned was Anri Sonohara and that her father had been abusive—but Akabayashi's expression didn't change. In fact, given how quickly he answered after Izaya's barb, he'd been expecting the provocation.

He really is inscrutable. Between him and Shiki, the Awakusu-kai sure have a lot of folks you can't ever count out, he observed, bowing obsequiously and putting away the envelope.

"Then I will look into this job for you," Izaya said.

“I’ll take a thorough look at the current state of the boy named Mikado Ryuugamine.”

The boys passed each another, while the adults’ plots twisted and curled.
A great vortex was building beneath Ikebukuro.
And not a single person could predict what awaited at its center.



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AFTERWORD

Hello, it's nice to see you folks again for the first time in a while—if it has been. I'm Ryohgo Narita.

This was the ninth volume of the *Durarara!!* series. We're almost to two digits, and it's only thanks to your support that we've come this far. Thank you so much, all my readers!

I often get questions from people who only read the *Durarara!!* series saying, "Why can't you write faster?" Well, the fact of the matter is that I'm currently penning five different series for the Dengeki Bunko line at the same time, and in between each *Durarara!!* volume is a number of other books... so if you're interested in what else I have to offer, maybe check out *Baccano!*, *Vamp!*, *Etsusa Bridge*, or *Hariyama-san at the Center of the World*...

At any rate, it's been over a year since the airing of the *Durarara!!* anime, and so much has happened in that time. While much of that has been wonderful, it's also meant a huge uptick in workload that has knocked me on the ropes. It's been a strange year in which I've somehow slipped into a dimension where I have more work than when I used to put out seven novels a year, but I was able to make it through thanks to the glory of the *Durarara!!* anime, manga, and related merchandise and the support of everyone still reading!

This month also marks the release of the final DVD of the series!

I'm overcome with emotion, but it's a mixture of both happiness and sadness. The year full of excitement over the *Durarara!!* anime is over, and now I'm grappling with hope and worry for what comes next.

The last volume will include Episode 25 as an OVA—but like Episode 12.5, it has my original idea and character dialogue reformatted to work as a script. I came up with a huge amount of dialogue, thinking, *There's no way they can cut this down to thirty minutes*, but the work the director and scriptwriter did to distill the best parts is simply breathtaking...

Not only does it feature essentially every character, it even includes some like Max who hadn't appeared in the anime, so it should be quite lively. Please do enjoy it, along with the final televised episode!

I wish to express my incredible gratitude to Director Omori, Mr. Takagi the head writer and his staff, and all the people at Brain's Base studio for their fantastic work. But as it happens, another series that Omori, Takagi, and Brain's Base worked on, *Baccano!*, is getting a Blu-ray box set!

As of this writing, I haven't yet seen the increased quality and fidelity of the *Baccano!* Blu-ray, but I can tell you it was a tremendous adaptation of my novels, so whether you have or have not seen it already, please do check it out along with the *Durarara!!* anime!

Another very exciting development: Suzuhito Yasuda is putting out an art book based around his work on *Durarara!!* and other series! It'll be coming out alongside an art book for his manga *Yozakura Quartet*, serialized in the monthly *Shonen Sirius* magazine. I'm really happy that *Durarara!!* gets to be involved in such a major release!

I'm sure there will be more details and advertisements as it gets closer to release, so please check out the Yasuda world for its involvement with the *Durarara!!* and *Etsusa Bridge* series!

...Hmm, I feel like all I've done is plug related products, so let's discuss *Durarara!!*, Volume 9 and my recent circumstances.

This was a story about Izaya. So far I've had Izaya suffering some horrible fate at the end of every third volume. Whether or not he broke that jinx this time around will be up to your personal opinion.

As for me...I've been using my PSP to Hunt some Monsters and Ronpa some Dangan.

...Sorry.

Now that I've finished this book, I've been fully enjoying *Monster Hunter Portable 3rd* at last. But just when I thought I'd be dedicating all my attention to *MH*, along came the shocking *Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc*. It's totally driven an ice pick into my brain...

It's kind of like a high-speed, white-knuckle psychedelic murder mystery combining action and puzzle solving and packed with totally out-of-this-world characters. It completely knocked me on my ass!

You should definitely look up *Danganronpa* if you haven't heard of it and see if its twisted sense of style suits your taste!

Wait...am I just plugging unrelated products now?!

* The following is the usual list of acknowledgments.

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To Suzuhito Yasuda, who took time out of his busy schedule with his art book and manga serial to provide his wonderful interior illustrations. I'm sorry that I turned the text over to you so late in the process...

And to all the readers who checked out this book.

To all of the above, the greatest of appreciation!

January 2011—"Getting His Mind Invaded by Squid Girl"
Ryohgo Narita

